

Christmas Awakening

Luke 2:1-20

December 25th, 2022

North Decatur Presbyterian Church

David Lewicki, preaching

The gospel stories about the birth of Jesus are so careful to set Jesus' birth in a particular time and a particular place.

- Luke says Jesus was born in the days of Caesar Augustus... when Quirinius was the governor of Syria.
- Matthew says that Jesus was born "when Herod was king of Judea." Herod was a client king who ruled over a small territory at the emperor Augustus' discretion.

Octavian, known as Augustus, ruled the empire for 41 years. Considered by some the "greatest" Roman emperor, Augustus had unilateral authority over the Roman army, the Senate, and economic policy. He was worshiped as the Son of God. His empire stretched from Africa to northern Europe. On the surface, the empire was a system of roads, global trade, and grand buildings. But underneath, the empire was military state that ruled through brutality and oppression—taxation; exploitation; bribery; and bullying.

Augustus ruled every square inch of that territory, every human being owed their life to the emperor. No further proof is needed than that the gospels begin when Joseph is forced to leave his home to be registered—so that he could pay the emperor taxes.

Beginning the story of Jesus in the reign of Emperor Augustus is not a trivial, historical detail. It is essential to the story itself. Jesus was born in a desolate corner of Augustus' kingdom. Jesus' parents are subjects of the emperor, who tells them where to go and when, and how much they owe. When Jesus comes into the world, his mother Mary is squatting in an animal stall—William Butler Yeats called this birth scene, "the uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor."

Gustavo Gutierrez, Peruvian priest and liberation theologian, says yes, Jesus is "born into your heart." But don't forget the circumstances of Jesus' birth—they matter. He says, "The irruption of God into human history is an incarnation into littleness and service in the midst of overbearing power exercised by the mighty of the world. The irruption smells like a stable."

You know this. You do. The reign of love and justice is born inside the heart of the empire to those who have the least at stake in the empire's preservation. Jesus grows up and teaches us about what our God is doing through him, he says the "empire of God" is at hand—it has come to overthrow the existing one. The people who hear that message, and the ones who get to see it enacted—the ones who receive the love of God in all of its fullness—in healing and at table fellowship—are those who are ready to let the empire burn.

Listen, American democracy is not Augustus' Rome. It's just not. But if you think the wealth inequality is that much different—you may be surprised. If you think our democracy is not

controlled and major decisions are not made by the wealthy and the powerful, you are not paying attention. If you don't think the structures of power in America have decided that certain people don't matter, you haven't been to a failing public school, or a drug rehabilitation center, or inside a prison. If you think America is the kingdom of God, you haven't been spending enough time with Jesus.

Christ is born to set us free! In Christ, we are citizens of a new kingdom. Christ came not only to forgive our sins, but to free us from the sinful systems of domination that render some people "powerful" and others "powerless." Christianity is a nonviolent revolution to overthrow the systems that create and perpetuate unequal distribution of wealth and power in this world.

In seminary, I remember hearing a story about one of the great feminist theologians in the 80s—I wish I knew if it was Bev Harrison or Dorothy Soelle—and the table grace she used to say: "some of us have enough and some of us don't: until that changes, long live the revolution of Jesus."

In the time of Caesar Augustus, Christ was born. Christ is born today. Go and find him. You know where to look. And may the revolution that began on Christmas morning on the bestial floor never end until the last is first and the hungry are filled with good things.