



Westminster Presbyterian Church Knoxville, TN
December 24, 2024
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "After the Counting, Glory"

Luke 2:1-20 (NRSV)

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.

Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

“After the Counting, Glory”

Well, there it is again, all so neat and tidy. The birth story of the Gospel of Luke, complete with the Gloria, Mary pondering in her heart, the family laying the baby down in the manger (and that’s it - as if that’s the end of the story of a newborn’s first night born outside).

You and I know the truth, though, don’t we? You know the truth about Christmas – how it’s never *that* tidy. Do you know, how I know that Christmas is, more often than not, *a mess*? I know, because I watch Christmas movies.

Have you ever sat down and thought about the plot of most Christmas movies? They make Christmas look awful!

Let’s play a game. I will describe a well-known Christmas movie’s plot, and you guess which one I’m talking about. And see if you can find our theme, of the imperfection of Christmas, running throughout:

#1

An 8-year-old boy is abandoned on Christmas by his parents who leave the country without realizing he isn’t with them. He then has to defend himself against a violent home invasion. Along the way, he gets sage advice from a destitute woman on the mean streets of Chicago who has an inordinate love for pigeons.

This is an easy one, it is... *Home Alone*.

#2

A middle-aged man attempts to throw a traditional Christmas Eve dinner for his extended family. Unfortunately, due to corporate greed, he does not get his expected Christmas bonus, making him unable to afford a Christmas gift he has already bought on credit. As a consequence, his unemployed cousin kidnaps the CEO of this man’s company at gunpoint. The movie ends as the Chicago city SWAT team is called.

This is a personal family favorite... *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*.

#3

A classic: On Christmas Eve, a man contemplates ending his life thinking he has sacrificed his dreams for no reason. He is only stopped when an angel appears to him and shows him that his town would be even worse off if he had never lived.

It is, of course, a Wonderful Life

#4

This movie begins with the sudden violent death of Santa Clause on Christmas Eve, as he falls to his death attempting to deliver toys. As a consequence, the man whose clumsiness led to Santa's death is forced to take over his job, causing disruption to his mental, physical, and family health.

This is, of course, Tim Allen's *The Santa Clause*

You see! Christmas is always a mess! At least according to the movies. The same thing could be said, by the way, about the Christmas narrative of the Gospel of Luke. It's not really as neat and tidy as it looks.

It begins with a registration carried out by the Empire:

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went...to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

Registered; registered; registered; registered. Luke uses the word 4 times in 5 verses, to make sure we get his point: the Holy Family is living under the tyranny of Empire.

If anyone likes things all neat and tidy, by the way, it's the Empire. The authorities want to know who you are, who you belong to, and where you're from. And by the way, to the extent that there were registrations of this kind in the Empire, they were for the purposes of taxation.

Notice, that Caesar wants to register, ‘all the world’ – the Greek is *oikoumēnē*, literally ‘everywhere that is inhabited.’ How neat and tidy is that for you?

But that’s not really how it happens, right? Caesar may imagine his power extends to all the world, but really, his power only reaches to the borders of the Empire. And even within the Empire, Caesar’s power seems to falter.

Notice for example, the shepherds, “keeping watch over their flocks by night.” These lowest of the field laborers cannot take a break from their work, cannot leave their flocks to go back to their hometowns. Come to think about it, what about the inn keeper who turns the Holy Family away – somebody had to be running the inn for all the travelers.

What about the workers, the servants, the military? Not everyone can just pick up and leave. Rome would have been turned upside down. Really, the whole undertaking seems rather impossible. Caesar wants omnipotent power, but the whole world can’t shut down for everyone to go home. How could that work? Life is too messy for that.

The Empire’s neat and tidy narrative comes undone.

Also, so far, we’ve been assuming Luke even has it right that Caesar decreed such a world-wide registration ‘in those days.’ But that’s questionable.

As we saw earlier in the weeks of Advent, Luke is a bit of a historian. He wants the reader to know what and when things happened:

The story begins in Luke 1:5, *In the days of King Herod of Judea*. That’s when Mary learns by angelic decree she will give birth to Jesus.

So also here in Luke 2:2 – Jesus is now born during *the first registration...taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria*.

A Neat and Tidy story.

But actually, not so much.

It turns out Luke’s timeline is off.

Herod the Great died 10 years before Quirinius was governor of Syria. There’s no way these two events happened just 9 months apart. Luke gets his timeline wrong.

Even more suspect, there's no historical evidence that Augustus Caesar ever ordered an Empire-wide registration in the first place. Wouldn't it be in the Roman history books if he did? A world-wide registration. There were, however, much smaller registrations under Quirinius, but even these didn't require travel to one's ancestral town. You registered where you lived. Which, when you think about it, actually makes a lot more sense.

Luke's neat and tidy narrative comes undone.

In fact, when you think about it, the whole religious narrative, that this story is based on, about the coming of a Messiah from the ancestral line of David, Israel's great king, doesn't really pan out, either. Luke goes out of his way to show that Joseph is from the line of David, but, then Luke also goes out of his way to show Jesus doesn't really come from the bloodline of David, at least not in the traditional sense. Jesus is more *adopted* into the line of David.

And I don't think that's what the Hebrew Scriptures had in mind when they proclaimed 'a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse' (Isaiah 11:1).

Later, in chapter 3, the gospel traces Jesus's genealogy to show he is the Davidic Messiah. It goes all the way back to David. The problem, again, is that Luke has to go through Joseph to do that. So, Luke's genealogy starts with these words:

Jesus...was the son (as was thought) of Joseph.

So which is it Luke? Must the Messiah be born by miracle to the Virgin or must he be descended in the bloodline of David. He tries to have it both ways, and in the end, it's just a bit, well...messy.

You see, in the end, this neat and tidy Christmas story, is anything but.

The Empire gets things wrong.
The prophetic tradition gets things wrong.
Even Luke gets things wrong.

But wait!

Before you get up and leave. Before you think, ‘Well he’s ruined Christmas. Pointing out the Gospel’s foibles on Christmas Eve, who does he think he is?’ – before all that; I want to say, that all of this...messiness....

All of this uncomfortable ‘pointing out the troublesome details of the Gospel,’ is actually right in line with Luke’s is trying to tell us about the birth of the Savior.

Remember, Luke proclaims a Savior, who comes, not with a neat and tidy bow; not in an overly sentimental Christmas pageant story. Rather, the Gospel proclaims a savior born of people, just barely making it. A heavenly family who needs a manger because they can’t afford room in the inn. A heavenly host that comes, not to Herod or Caesar, but to poor shepherds (people who were invisible to polite society). In short, the Christmas story, is the proclamation of a savior who comes to us, in our mess. And that truth is supposed to shock us, and make us uncomfortable.

The problem is that we are too used to this narrative. We’ve memorized it; dramatized it; domesticated it. What we’ve got to do, is to figure out how to make it uncomfortable again.

Why? Because Luke’s point is that God comes to us in our discomfort; in the grit of life; in the hardship of life.

So, if you find yourself this evening, coming into Christmas, not at your best. In fact, if you come, after a hard year.

If you are beside yourself with worry, because either you or those you love, or perhaps both, are living with illness.

Or if Christmas isn’t the same this year, now with someone gone; or now that the kids are all grown up; or your loved ones are starting to show their age.

If you come to this service, and it’s the only time you’ve set foot in a church this year. Or maybe you come here all the time, but you come, not with perfect faith but with deep and irreconcilable doubt.

If you come to this community, not sure if you can trust a church community. Or if you can trust people who call themselves Christians, after seeing how cruel and intolerant some Christians can be.

If you come exhausted, not sure if you can keep working, keep fighting to make this world a better place, after so, so, so many disappointments.

In short, if you come here, and you find yourself, not so neat and tidy, but really, in a bit of a mess, then you need to know that this Christmas story is for you.

Because this is the point of this night: Jesus meets us in the mud and the grit of life. Not in a Christmas pageant manger but in the actual feeding-trough of life, in all of your and all of my imperfections.

So, wherever it is you may feel like you're coming undone, keep a look out, because that is where Jesus is going to meet you, where the glory of the Lord will surround you.

It is in such flawed moments, that God's people have affirmed through the centuries the Christmas faith: 'Emmanuel, God is with us.'

It is in such unfinished places that God meets us, and we find ourselves again singing from the deepest, most real part of our souls:

'Gloria, Glory to God in the Highest!'

'Joy to the world.'

Amen.