

CHRISTMAS THROUGH THE EYES OF MARY:

5: ADORED

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Luke 2:8-20

During the season of Advent, I have been preaching this sermon series called “Christmas Through the Eyes of Mary.” We have been looking at the account of Jesus’ birth as presented to us by the gospel writer Luke. Luke focuses on Mary more than any of the other gospels do.

As Christians, as we read these stories today, we naturally center our attention on the principal characters—Mary and Joseph, the infant Jesus, along with Gabriel and Zechariah and Elizabeth. What we don’t do—and I am as guilty of this as anyone—is to fully appreciate the historical backdrop of Jesus’ birth. Jesus wasn’t born in a stable. He was born into an empire.

It is not Luke’s fault if we overlook the geo-political backdrop of Jesus’ birth, because Luke tells us right at the start when he says, *in the days of King Herod of Judea*, and also, *In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus*. Hearing “Herod” and “Augustus” would immediately remind the people of Luke’s congregation not just when Jesus was born, but what the world was like at the time.

Think of it this way. If I began a sermon saying, “In 1972, I went to Boy Scout camp,” your emotional reaction would be minimal. 1972 is just a date. But what if instead I said, “I want to tell you a story that takes place during the Nixon Administration.” Immediately, you would begin to form emotional connections to that time period. You would think of Vietnam and maybe even with sadness over the cousin or uncle who died there. You would think of the Watergate hearings and the Saturday Night Massacre and social upheaval and Woodstock and more. By saying “Nixon Administration,” the events of the story that I tell take on greater significance.

For the people of Luke’s congregation, hearing “Herod” and “Augustus” would place Jesus’ birth into a fuller context.

As I mentioned last week, Augustus was the first emperor of the Roman Empire. He was able to bring a close to numerous wars and conflicts and consolidate the Roman lands into one empire. He was credited with bringing *Pax Romana*, or Roman Peace. Some even called it the *Pax Augustus* in his honor.

But Roman peace came at a price. Augustus brutally murdered any perceived enemies. He suppressed human rights and liberties. He achieved peace by coercion and oppression and control.

Although we know him today as Augustus, his given name was actually Octavius. He was from the powerful Octavia family. Augustus, which means “majestic,” was a title conferred on him by the Roman senate. In addition to this title Augustus, Octavius also took on the title of First Man, as well as Emperor (which means commander). He also called himself *divi filius* (which is Latin for Son of the Divine). He was also referred to as Savior and Lord.

Although Luke composed his gospel several decades after the death of Augustus, his people well understood life under Roman rule. In addition to Augustus, who died in the year 14, the people had endured such emperors as Tiberius and Caligula and Claudius and Nero, all of whom happened to be descendants of Augustus.

So, when Luke references Emperor Augustus, he is not just reminding his readers of the time of Jesus birth, he is also establishing the radical juxtaposition between the existing empire and God's emerging kingdom; he is highlighting the Roman peace versus the prince of peace.

In this sermon series, I've been following Mary through the first two chapters of Luke's gospel. We watched as the angel Gabriel was sent by God to inform Mary that she would conceive and give birth to a son that she would name Jesus. The angel tells Mary, *He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.*

That is all well and good, but you can't brush off the feeling that this angel got the address wrong. If God is going to send a Messiah, shouldn't it be born to someone with some power and standing? Mary is just a young, unwed woman living in a small village in a region called Galilee in Judea on the edge of the Roman Empire. She is no doubt a lovely young woman, but on the geo-political stage, Mary possesses as little power or influence as one could have. She is one grain of sand on a great beach. And yet this angel comes from God to her. And this is what I want to emphasize with you today—to impress upon you just little power Mary has when held up in next to the empire.

But Mary accepts the news of the angel saying to him, *Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.* And this is what sets Mary apart, her willingness to serve God with all her heart mind and strength.

Mary indeed becomes pregnant. Then, near her due date, she is forced by the Roman government to travel with Joseph, her fiancée, to his hometown of Bethlehem in order that he can be registered.

While in Bethlehem, she goes into labor. For reasons that aren't fully explained, Mary gives birth to her son in a stable among the animals. Her child's first bed was

a feeding trough. It is difficult for us to separate the story of Jesus' birth from the pomp and pageantry of our tradition Christmas celebration. But the take-away should be that God came to us through the least powerful, least influential person—a young, unwed woman in a backwater village in a land occupied by a foreign government. But she had strength, and that was her faith in God.

But when it comes time for this miracle child to be born, it takes place among animals in a location far from her home.

In Bethlehem, after the child is born and before Mary and Joseph make their way back to Nazareth, something else happens. It is night, just outside Bethlehem in the fields where shepherds are guarding their sheep. In the quiet of the night, an angel appears before them. And to make it clear that this was indeed an angel, we are told that God's glory encircled the shepherds. Understandably, these shepherds are terrified. The Greek actually says they were *afraid with great fear*. (I always love that phrase.) Yes, it is redundant, but it makes the point well. They were terror-stricken.

This angel has a message for the shepherds. The angel says,
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.

There are three words in this statement that are crucial to understanding the significance of what the angel says. The first phrase is *good news*, the second is *Savior*, and the third is *Lord*. These words are important because they are Roman words. They are not yet Christian. These are words that the people would have understood.

The *good news* in Greek is *euangelion*. It is from this word that we get the word evangelism. We also translate this word as gospel. So, when we talk about the gospel according to Luke, we are really saying the *euangelion* according to Luke—the gospel, the good news.

However, in Jesus' day, *euangelion* was not a religious word. It was anything but religious. It was a highly charged political term. *euangelion* was used in reference to the empire to announce a military victory or some great happening or even the birth of a royal child. Such an announcement was good news, but mostly for the favored people at the of the ladder.

Outside of the Bible, the best-known use of *euangelion* is a stone tablet known as the Priene Inscription. This tablet was written in 9 BC and discovered in Turkey about 100 years ago. On this tablet are the words announcing the birthday of Augustus. Part of the announcement reads:

“Since Providence... has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus... sending him as a **savior [σωτήρ]**, both for us and for our descendants, that he

might end war and arrange all things... and since the birthday of the god [τοῦ Θεοῦ] Augustus was the beginning of the **good news [εὐαγγέλιον]** for the world that came by reason of him..." (and it goes on).

You get the idea. According to the official government proclamation, Emperor Augustus is Savior, Lord, and the subject matter of good news.

This Roman proclamation is not unlike the words of the angel. But angel is talking about Jesus, not Augustus. The angel's message takes these words and radically appropriates them for God's purpose. The good news, the good news is not just for the privileged. It will be for all people. The Savior will be from Bethlehem, not Rome. This Savior will also be the one we recognize as Lord, not the emperor.

This is why the early Christians face persecution, for their rejection of the divinity of the emperor.

The angel continues telling the shepherds that the sign of this good news is that in Bethlehem they *will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.*

What is also consistent with this story is that the angel appears to shepherds. We talked about Mary having little power or influence. Well, shepherds probably had less. It would be difficult to find a class of people with less luster than shepherds. Shepherds are kind of like American cowboys. Sure, we have this romanticized vision of them living off the land, but you really don't want your daughter to marry one. Shepherds lived outside. They were dirty. Rarely were the sheep their own. Instead, they worked for whoever owned the sheep. If the messenger of God has an announcement to make, it would stand to reason that they would deliver it to a person of position and standing—exactly what shepherds weren't.

And then, as if to emphasize the point, the angel is joined by a small army of heavy heavenly beings praising God and saying, *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!*

The angel departs and the shepherds head into Bethlehem. They find Mary and Joseph and the child as described and they inform them of what they had learned about this child. Mary listens and ponders it all in her heart. The shepherd's leave and return to their flocks, *glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.* In other words, the shepherds become the first evangelists.

Luke's gospel is radical in the way that it holds up Jesus in front of the empire and invites us to make the decision of who is Savior, who is Lord. Are we going to follow the prince of power or the prince of peace. Whose birth is it that is the *euangelion* good news for all people no matter how lowly or powerless they may be,

no matter where they live, no matter what they look like. The birth of Jesus brings a new power whose rule will challenge the prevailing world order, redistribute wealth, end oppression and bring peace. As we read in Mary's Magnificat, *His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*

This is one we worship.