

**Christmas Eve, 2016**

**Peace on Earth**

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“Be not afraid of greatness,” wrote William Shakespeare in his well-known play *Twelfth Night*, “Some are born great, some achieve greatness, some have greatness thrust upon them.” Shakespeare’s well known quote could very easily describe the man our well-known Christmas Gospel begins with tonight: the man known as the first Roman emperor: Augustus.

Every Christmas we read the same words from Luke’s Gospel which means every year we hear the same names flash by us, sometimes unintentionally mispronounced by well-meaning clergy: the names of Augustus and Quirinius. Many have interpreted the inclusion of these names to indicate the date of Jesus’ birth, which has been a problem for many historians as the specific dates of history do not match with Luke’s account in our Christmas Gospel tonight. A few scholars and historians have gone so far as to say that this means the author of Luke made a mistake, or was misinformed, or the English wasn’t translated right, and a very few have used the inaccuracy as evidence that Jesus never existed, and is a sort of “fake news” story of the first century. However, these historians and scholars never question the existence of the men mentioned at the start of Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth.

Perhaps that is because men like Augustus and Quirinius operated very differently than Jesus; they wrote their own memoirs, they participated in established systems that are known and respected. And, of course, they were powerful men. Men whose names represent not just an individual person’s life, but the political, religious and military power of an entire empire. So, I can’t help but wonder when the author of Luke’s Gospel mentioned these powerful men, there might have been another reason other than establishing a date for Jesus’ birth. Perhaps the author of Luke was telling those of us who read these words year after year something else about Jesus, something that begins with these two men who history can tell us a lot about.

Augustus became emperor after his great uncle Julius Cesar was assassinated, as Julius Cesar had named him his adopted son and heir in his will. Augustus is known as the leader who transitioned Rome from being a republic to an empire and started the famous Pax Romana, or Roman Peace which marked a significant

change for Rome. It meant the end of civil wars and the beginning of occupation of conquered territories or provinces. Under Augustus the Roman Empire doubled in size, extending from Britain to India. Augustus spent most of his time outside of Rome consolidating power in his provinces and instituting a system of censuses and taxation that integrated the empire's provinces. This system of registration and taxation, along with military might, institution building, and law making is how the Roman Peace came about and an Empire was born.

Thus, Augustus is often described by most historians as a great leader. Sometimes even a humble leader, as he built many roads, buildings and roman temples but refused to build himself a palace. However, he also declared Julius Cesar a deity and himself the son of a deity, which troubled many Jewish people who found themselves under his rule. His establishment of and ability to maintain Roman Peace (sometimes by using propaganda) has been called a miracle. In Priene, an inscription was found celebrating his birth that read: "Providence has brought into the world Augustus and filled him with a hero's soul for the benefit of mankind. A Savior for us and our descendants, he will make wars to cease and order all things well. The epiphany of Cesar has brought to fulfillment past hopes and dreams."

Likewise, Quirinius the man named as governor of Syria in tonight's Christmas Gospel was a trusted ally of Augustus and was a military hero, a consul, and is said to have developed the type of census that caused so much difficulty for Jewish people because it forced them to convert their property into money, money that bore the likeness of the emperor and the words declaring said emperor to be the son of a god. Although many historians agree these were great men who made great contributions to a great empire, not every historian and scholar is a fan, there are those who criticize Augustus as an arrogant blood thirsty man who kept his power through manipulation and propaganda, which goes to show history can have many facets and perspectives so perhaps the truth is found somewhere in the mix.

Just by mentioning the names of these historical figures, the author of Luke tells us a lot about the world Jesus was born into. Jesus was not born into a fairy-tale world free of politics and problems where everyone is happy and perfect, Jesus was born into a very real world, not at all that different from our own. A world where the promised peace of Rome was overshadowed by political power

and political struggle, taxation, registration, imperial religious claims and fear that are part of the birth of the Roman Empire; even Jesus' birth, which means even Christmas, is not free from the politics of power and fear.

Against this backdrop of fear and political power, Luke gives us the light of a completely different kind of greatness. The good news of great joy for all people the angel sang about when announcing the birth of a baby born to a young woman in an unusual place to find a baby because unlike men such as Augustus and Quirinius, there was no room for Jesus and his little, very unimportant family. While it seems we human beings are quick to make room for great leaders, God with Us was not warmly received and had to fend for himself.

Not unlike Augustus, the angels had a very bold and eloquent proclamation of Jesus' birth, proclaiming a real world Saviour for all people in the real world. A Savior who brings God glory and peace on earth. Which doesn't sound all that different from what was proclaimed of the great Roman emperor, unless you have a better understanding of the Jewish people's word for peace. For them peace is not an absence of conflict or war. Peace is not a sort of conformity brought about through fear of military power and financial restrictions. Peace to the Jewish people is richer, deeper.

Peace, *shalom*, means in the simplest of terms: wholeness of being and can be described as relation of persons and God, relations of person with one another, relation of person with the natural or physical world, and one's relation with self. This type of peace is in total contrast with evil and it was believed that this wholeness of being was God's intention and gift to all people but sin like greed, blame, shame, and revenge got in the way. Thus, this type of peace became associated with the eschatological hope of the messiah in Old Testament prophets like Zechariah and Isaiah. Such peace, these prophets proclaimed, would be a way for the people of God to recognize the messiah, and receive the peace of God here on earth.

This is the peace the angels proclaimed and it is this peace we see in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus who never directly challenged the Roman Empire, but instead walked among real, ordinary people in the real ordinary world bringing that peace which is wholeness of being. In all the Gospels, we can see Jesus doing this by restoring the ill to their communities, treating all people, even outcasts, with respect, and telling people about God's Kingdom where greatness isn't measured by things like wealth, age, gender, political power, class, education, or cleverness, but by how one receives the Love of God

and lives into that Love. Jesus is our Saviour not because he defeated an empire, but because he liberated us from sin by bringing the peace of restoration of wholeness to all of us, all people everywhere, the powerful and powerless, the happy, the grieving, the fearful, the confident, even to you and to me.

This is the same peace that is promised here again, tonight, as we once more hear the words of the angels proclaim the holy birth of Jesus. Perhaps that is the good news of great joy many of us here who live in a real world where there are still conflicts, disappointments, grudges, loneliness, griefs, pain, fear and of course abuse of politics and power are longing for or seeking this year at Christmas. Perhaps we could all use some of the peace that doesn't demand cowering in fear, but gives the freedom to draw close to God, who isn't afraid to meet us where we are, who is nearer than we might realize, who is longing to restore and strengthen our relationships: with God, with each other, with the earth and world we live in, and with ourselves. This peace won't fail when political powers fail, but outlasts any and every empire. This peace doesn't promise absence of conflict, but does promise that no matter what happens, God is with us and will help us find the strength we need, which is indeed good news of great joy at Christmas and every day.

While Luke's Gospel might be showing us the great love of God in contrast to the great military power of an empire, that doesn't mean the peace that is promised is not real or a dated historical offer. The peace of God is here with us every time we aren't afraid to make room in our lives for God's Love in Christ, and is here for us, helping us find the courage to let go of anger and guilt so we can forgive those who hurt us and forgive ourselves, to learn to live with loss so that we aren't held captive to the past, and the many other ways God's transforming, life-giving love can bring us wholeness of being in our hearts, minds, souls, and strength.

Such wholeness of being glorifies God who gives us this peace, which is not only good news, it is what great joy is made of. No matter how you find yourself tonight, joyous and happy, lonely or sad, frightened or confident, may you not be afraid to make room for Christ and his great gift of restorative peace so that you may live into that peace and shine God's glory into every day in our real world.

Merry Christmas