

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

December 24, 2023

A Decree

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus...” Want to hear a part of that decree? Jillian Engelhardt, an instructor at Texas Christian University, quotes the decree mentioned here in Luke: “Since Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a **savior**, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance (excelled even our anticipations), surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the **good news** for the world that came by reason of him,’ which Asia resolved in Smyrna.” Did you notice some familiar language in that decree?

The author of Luke's Gospel likely appropriated the language of imperial propaganda to describe the birth of the Messiah. In contrast to Emperor Augustus in his extravagant royal palace, the true savior of the world is born in a stable and sleeps in a feeding trough. Rather than surrounded by the wealthy and influential, the true king of the world is found in the company of shepherds, peasants, and strangers from a foreigner land. The good news for the world is found in the Word of God, Jesus Christ; it is not to be found in the proclamations and executive orders issued in halls of power.

We find quite a contrast here between the divine manifestation of power in the form of a baby and the worldly (and let's admit, rather pathetic) display of power. God's power is made manifest in the person of Jesus Christ. God's power is on display in healing and feeding, in forgiving and restoring, in teaching and preaching, in bringing shalom wholeness to people and communities. Worldly power shows what? Military might and violence. Laws and decrees backed by soldiers and police. Forcing everyone in the Empire

to be registered, meaning an expensive and time-consuming process that most people would prefer to avoid. Plus, this registration has what purpose? Taxes of course. The end result of this difficult journey for Joseph and Mary will likely be higher taxes and an increase Roman presence in the area.

Worldly power...do what we say or else. Divine power...empties itself to join humanity when we went astray. Worldly power seeks to possess. Divine power seeks to give away. Worldly power insists on obedience. Divine power invites relationship. Worldly power is obsessed with luxury and comfort. Divine power is found where people are in need. Worldly power will divide in order to control. Divine power always pursues reconciliation and cooperation. Worldly power leads to war and scarcity. Divine power leads to God's peaceful kingdom, where hunger and thirst are no more, where everyone's needs are met.

Worldly power seeks to keep people fearful. Divine power...again and again, invites us to **not** fear. "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard,"¹ says the angel. "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God"² says Gabriel at the annunciation. And then in our reading this evening we hear the angel tell the shepherds, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people."³ Three times in two chapters a divine messenger tells people to not be afraid; Jesus will echo this phrase several more times in this Gospel. Divine power, though it can (understandably) cause us fear (who wouldn't at least be nervous at the presence of the divine), is not something we **need** fear. For God's power is not used to coerce or cajole the way worldly power often is. Instead, God's power is used for wholeness and healing.

It strikes me as somewhat funny...not in a "ha-ha" sort of way, but rather in a darker way. So many in the world are resigned to oppression. So many are weighed down by apathy. And it's no wonder, worldly power is on display everywhere. And worldly power is terrible. Worldly power is why there is war in Ukraine and Gaza. It's why there is violence in the Sudan and in Myanmar. It's why Somali fishermen resort to piracy when their traditional fishing shoals are over-fished by foreign corporations. It's why a child dies every 10 seconds from malnutrition, despite the world producing enough food for everyone.

¹ Luke 1:13b (NRSVUE)

² Luke 1:30b

³ Luke 2:10b

Emperor Augustus issues a decree that sends the Empire scrambling. His decree bears the weight of the mighty Roman army behind it. And who does not fear those legions? He issues a decree in which he promises peace and prosperity. But for whom? Mary and Joseph were afraid enough to make the long and arduous journey to Bethlehem, even at nine months pregnant. Did they experience peace and prosperity thanks to Augustus? I doubt it.

What decrees are the worldly powers issuing today? Are the worldly powers of today providing what they claim? Are we experiencing peace and prosperity? Or is there something else going on? Do you find yourself fearful? Apathetic? Overwhelmed? Anxious? Depressed? I wouldn't blame you for any of those feelings. The worldly powers...as they always do...have failed us. Leaving us empty and lost.

And there it is. There is the reality of humanity. We try and we try and we try to make the world a better place...a more equitable place. But we inevitably fail. Our leaders succumb to the temptations of power and the trappings of influence. Worldly power becomes nothing more than a tool of control and oppression. No wonder we needed the Incarnation! We needed to see an alternative. We needed (and still need) to see what God's Kingdom is like. What a world grounded in God's values might be.

Divine power doesn't say "Fear me!" Divine power says, "Fear not!" Divine power is exercised on behalf of others. Divine power identifies with the oppressed and marginalized. Divine power decrees the good news. The good news which is good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed.

No wonder Christ is born in the backwater village in an unimportant colony of the Roman Empire. That's the way of divine power. It seeks the lowly and the excluded. Divine power is choirs of angels singing glorias to an audience of insignificant shepherds. Divine power is topsy-turvy and it will turn our world upside down. God is in human form. God is with us and God is using us to display that wholesome, restoring, and providential divine power. Amen.