

Year Christmas I It Was a Daring Plan Luke 2 vv1 to 20

Partway through our Christmas story – the story of the birth of the Saviour of the whole world – it is actually a bunch of shepherds who are given the limelight. Luke uses the shepherds to drive home to us who it is this Saviour is being born to save. Luke sets up for us the contrast between what “is” in the world and what “will be” when God’s plan for salvation is finally complete.

People hear the historical details with which Luke begins this story and think that’s all there is to it...Luke is placing this momentous birth within a time frame with real historical rulers in order to establish that this birth actually happened. It is, though, much, much more than this.

Luke begins with the power of an empire. He tells us that Jesus’ birth takes place during the reign of Caesar Augustus and this Caesar’s decree is for the “whole world.” There is a famous inscription, called the Priene inscription, that describes Augustus’ birth as the birth of a god, the gift of divine providence, the saviour who will bring peace. His birthday is good news for everyone this inscription declares. All of this should sound very familiar. It is how Jesus and his birth is described by the angel. Luke shows to us what “is” under the thumb of empire in order to fully understand what “will be” in a world fully ruled by God.

Augustus is not the saviour of the world, his birth is not good news for everyone only those such as shipping merchants, money exchangers, and others who know how to get ahead and make a buck at the expense of the vulnerable people around them. The peace of Augustus is not true peace – it is only the absence of war because everyone is frightened at the physical intimidation of the Roman soldiers, of the strength and might of an empire that the average person cannot stand against.

Into this world of plenty for only the rich and powerful; this world of peace bought through fear of military might, comes another child...Jesus, Son of God. This child has a message that is the polar opposite to the exclusionary message of empire.

Luke provides us with many clues that Jesus' message is completely different from the "I am a self-made man or woman," "everyone for themselves," "the one who dies with the most toys, wins" message of empire. Instead of a lavish apartment within a royal palace, Jesus is born in the lower room of a common house, in the space reserved for the animals at night. In place of silk garments, Jesus is wrapped in simple bands of cloth. Rather than the news of the birth being announced first to the nobles and "who's who" of Roman society, it is a bunch of working-class shepherds who first hear the news of Jesus' birth. Perhaps most significantly, in place of the human messenger announcing Augustus' birth, Jesus' birth is heralded by an angel. Whereas Augustus *thinks* his birth is an important cosmic event with significance for the entire world, Jesus' birth really *is* an important cosmic event with significance for the entire world.

The well-known American preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, imagines God presenting the plan, to redeem all of creation through the birth of a child, in this way:

God tried the idea out on his cabinet of archangels and at first, they were all very quiet. Finally, the senior archangel stepped forward to speak for all of them. He told God how much they would worry – God would be putting himself at the mercy of his creatures, the angel said. People could do anything they wanted to him, and if he seriously meant to become one of them there would be no escape for him if things turned sour. Could he at least create himself as a magical baby with special powers? It would not take much – just the power to become invisible, maybe, or

the power to hurl bolts of lightning if the need arose. The baby idea was a stroke of genius, the angel said, it really was, but it lacked adequate safety features.

God thanked the archangels for their concern but said no, he thought he would just be a regular baby. How else could he gain the trust of his creatures? How else could he persuade them that he knew their lives inside out, unless he lived one like theirs? There was a risk. He knew that. Okay, there was a high risk, but that was part of what he wanted his creatures to know: that he was willing to risk everything to get close to them, in hopes that they might love him again.

It was a daring plan., but once the angels saw that God was dead set on it, they broke into applause – not the uproarious kind but the steady kind that goes on and on when you have witnessed something you know you will never see again.

While they were still clapping, God turned around and left the cabinet chamber, shedding his robes as he went. The angels watched as his midnight blue mantle fell to the floor, so that all the stars on it collapsed in a heap. Then a strange thing happened. Where the robes had fallen, the floor melted and opened up to reveal a scrubby brown pasture speckled with sheep and – right in the middle of them – a bunch of shepherds sitting around a campfire drinking wine out of a skin. It was hard to say who was more startled, the shepherds or the angels, but as the shepherds looked up at them, the angels pushed their senior member to the edge of the hole. Looking down at the human beings who were all trying to hide behind each other (poor things, no wings), the angel said in as gentle a voice as he could muster, “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 saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

And away up the hill, from the direction of town, came the sound of a newborn baby’s cry. (*Bread of Angels*, p.34-35).

It was a daring plan – this plan to save the world – this plan that lacked adequate safety features. Our God made flesh in the birth of a child, born a vulnerable child to show the world that our idea of power – based on property, position, and pocketbook – is flawed. That idea of power leads to the lust for more and better. It

leads to inequality, oppression, and it can never lead to true peace. This daring plan, lacking adequate safety features, did indeed result in the death of this Saviour of the world. The vulnerable child grew into a preacher, teacher, healer, miracle worker – a man who showed to a broken world how to live in the perfection of God’s kingdom that is coming. This man fought against the oppression and inequality brought about by empire and those in power killed him for it. But, in dying, he did save us. The world’s power threw its worst at him and he did not stoop to acting like them but, rather, he loved them. He forgave them. God’s power brought him back to life and, through the mystery of baptism, we participate in his death and life. We are clothed with the righteousness of this man who died because he dared to show us how to live.

And the birth of this amazing man, the baby who is God, born to save the world, was first announced to a ragtag bunch of shepherds. These hard-working shepherds labour all day, every day to survive. In the eyes of the world they will never be rich. In the eyes of the world they will never have status. In the eyes of the world, they will never have property of their own. These shepherds lived their lives caring for other creatures...their sheep. And these shepherds are meant to show us how we must be...living our lives caring for other creatures. Not that we don’t have any power according to the world – we do have property, and position, and money to varying degrees. What will lead us to be like the shepherds is not *valuing* the property, position, and money above love and compassion and the fight against all that is broken in this world...putting care for others and creation above the desire for more and better.

The shepherds lived in a broken world too. Everything wasn’t magically fixed when Jesus was born. But they trusted that it would be. Thousands of babies were born

every day but they were told this one was special and they believed this to be true. Rather than tell the shepherds that the baby has been born in Bethlehem, the angel calls Bethlehem the City of David to connect the baby to the expected Saviour who would be born of the line of David. The shepherds trusted this good news and went to see the baby for themselves. They trusted the good news and told everyone else about it. They trusted the good news and went back to the daily grind of shepherding, rejoicing – praising and glorifying God. What they had seen was a helpless little baby who couldn't even walk and talk, a baby who was clearly not born into money. They knew nothing of the life and death that lay ahead for this little baby. They had no idea how he was going to save the world but they trusted that he would and they were now a part of that. Although their circumstances hadn't changed, *they* had changed. They were filled with the joy and hope of knowing Jesus was born...of knowing the perfection of God's kingdom was coming. This is the joy and hope of Christmas time – although it can feel like it's all about presents, and parties, and pretty lights.

Our circumstances haven't changed in hearing the story of Jesus' birth – the birth of the one who will bring the entire world back into relationship with God and, in doing so, will bring perfect love and peace to the whole world. Our circumstances have not changed because we have heard this. We are going home to the same house, in the same vehicle, with the same people, back to our same lives of perhaps struggling to make ends meet, perhaps a life of modest comfort. The world has not changed. But if we trust in the good news of the angel as the shepherds did, if we hear and accept: "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 Saviour, who is the

Messiah, the Lord” then we will be changed...and in being changed, we then can change the world.

It is a world of empire that surrounds us – a world revolving around a power based on property, position and pocketbook. We see it in the war Putin has waged on Ukraine. We see it in the fear of being the first to use nuclear weapons yet no one is willing to give up their nuclear weapons. We see it in the record profits of oil companies and banks and insurance companies while the cost of living pushes many over the fragile edge of ‘making it’ to ‘not making it’. We see the results of such desire for more and better in the homeless on the streets, in the rising numbers of people using food banks, we see it in ourselves as, with one hand we reach for a can of soup on the grocery store shelf to contribute to the food bank while, with the other hand, we reach for the much more costly potted Christmas plant to decorate our front step. We all do such things as this. We all get sucked into, and participate in the idea of power given to us by empire – a power Jesus died to defeat. It cannot be fully defeated when hearts continue to embrace it instead of God’s ways.

It was a daring plan, this plan of God’s lacking adequate safety features. There was a high risk, but that was part of what he wanted his creatures to know: that he was willing to risk everything to get close to them, in hopes that they might love him again. Our circumstances have not changed this night...but *we* can change...and, in *being* changed, we *can* bring change to the world. Let us go home, like the shepherds, rejoicing – praising God and glorifying God, trusting in the good news: to you *is* born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.