

## Year B Nativity II 2023 Let the Disruption Begin Luke 2 vv1 to 20

Just this morning, a few of you heard Luke's story of the moment when the angel Gabriel showed up at Mary's front door. A young peasant girl, not yet married, never having yet even kissed a boy, was about to receive the news that she was going to become pregnant and give birth to the Saviour of the entire world. We learned that God is a disrupter: unexpectedly transforming lives in order to transform the world. God upsets the status quo because the status quo is not okay. It is a status quo of so much brokenness it's hard to know where to begin...racism, discrimination against certain groups of people, poverty, materialism, greed for power and reliance on power based on social status and wealth and then there are the wars that are the result of this. As music group, Linkin Park, sang so poignantly: "When the rich wage war it's the poor that die" (from their song, "Hands Held High"). The war being waged isn't just on a battlefield with guns, it is a war deeply ingrained within the very fabric of society...a war waged in board rooms and in back rooms...and the casualties surround us: people struggling to make ends meet, daily acid attacks on women in India, oppression and injustice, corruption, and greed abound. The cutthroat competition and callousness of humanity is mind-boggling at times. Luke, tonight, tells us the story of when God moved to end this war – the ultimate disruption in the status quo takes place on a quiet night in Bethlehem.

The story begins in a lack lustre way with the talk of a nation-wide census ordered by Caesar. Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem – their family's hometown – in order to be counted. It is there that Mary gives birth to Jesus and, since many have travelled there to be counted along with them, the birth takes place in the lower room of a house normally reserved for the animals to stay at night since there is no room in the inn. What seems like a pretty dull beginning to the incredible story of the birth of the Rescuer of the World is Luke's clever way of contrasting the dullness and darkness of

the way the world *is* with the joy and earth-shattering brilliance of the way the world will be by the end of his story.

As the curtain is drawn back on the opening of tonight's drama, the set on stage reveals to us the ruling worldly empire. Jesus' birth takes place during the reign of Caesar Augustus and this Caesar apparently dictates orders to the "whole world." Archeologists discovered an ancient inscription, called the Priene inscription, that describes Augustus' birth as the birth of a god, the saviour who will bring peace. His birthday is good news for everyone this inscription declares. Sound familiar? This is how Jesus and his birth is described.

Augustus is not the saviour of the world, his birth is not good news for everyone only those 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.

Instead of a lavish apartment within a royal palace, Jesus is born in the lower room of a common house, where the animals stay. In place of silk, 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. 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 quiet, almost boring first act of the drama is suddenly followed by a scene whose magnificence displays the cosmic significance of tonight's event. Renowned preacher Tom Long writes, "Suddenly the episode spills beyond the edges of imagination's canvas. The night sky is flooded by the light of glory. First there is one angel, then another and another, until finally there is a heavenly host, putting on an angelic display so terrifyingly spectacular that [we hear the] report that the shepherds were terrified (p.39 of *Shepherds and Bathrobes*, Tom Long).

Amazingly, all of this dazzling technicolour display by a myriad of glorious supernatural heavenly beings is all for the benefit of a bunch of shepherds. Shepherds. "The lives of shepherds in the ancient world were often difficult. Shepherds frequently lived alone for long periods of time. They were often on the move, taking the flock from pasture to pasture. The weather could be uncomfortable with heat, cold, drought, rain, or lightning. Wild animals could be threatening. Some shepherds owned their own flocks, but many were hired hands who were neglected or exploited by the (often absentee) owners. Shepherds could be rough and even anti-social" (Ronald J. Allen, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). In the Roman Empire there was an unbending social ranking in which the rich, powerful people at the top had incredible benefits compared to the people at the bottom where the shepherds were located.

For Luke, the shepherds represent human existence in the present, broken age. And *they* are the ones who receive the good news of great joy for all people: the Saviour, the Rescuer, who is Lord of all, has arrived. "Glory to God in the highest heaven," the angels sing. "And on earth peace among those whom he favours!" Heaven and earth are now linked together and Luke has been showing us who it is that God favours –

shepherds and a peasant girl...the vulnerable and the exploited in a society of privilege for the powerful.

The shepherds show us the life-changing transformation given to those who hear, and trust, in the good news of our disrupting, turn-the-values-of-the-world-upside-down God. We notice the shepherds because of the way in which Luke describes this cosmic event. "The important thing to notice is that Luke does not dazzle us with expansive description. How bright was this shining glory of the Lord? Luke does not say. What did the angels look like? Luke is silent. How many were there? Luke declines to count them. What exactly were the angels doing as they filled the sky with song? Luke has no comment. What expression was on the face of the newborn Saviour? Luke says nothing. It is as if Luke pulls our attention away from the events themselves and focuses it instead on something else, namely the responses of those who were involved. The shepherds were "terrified", but returned from Bethlehem "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen" The people who heard their reports "were amazed at what the shepherds told them." Mary "treasured all these words, pondering them in her heart." As for the "glory of the Lord," Luke is quiet, but when it comes to those upon whom it shone, he breaks his descriptive silence and saves his fullest language to portray what happened in their lives and hearts...

We are told of the light which filled the world that night, but we do not really see it. We see instead the reflection of that light on the faces and in the hearts of those who were present" (p.40, 41 of *Shepherds and Bathrobes*, altered a bit).

The shepherds' response is inspiring. Despite the fact that everything wasn't magically fixed when Jesus was born, 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. 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 *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.

Our circumstances haven't changed in hearing the story of Jesus' birth – the birth of the one who will bring perfect love and peace to the whole world. We will go home to the same house with the same people. It is still 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 in Ukraine and in Gaza and elsewhere. We see it in the record profits of oil companies and grocery store executives while the cost of living pushes many over the fragile financial edge into poverty. 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 things like 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 will not be fully defeated when hearts continue to embrace it instead of the ways of God's kingdom.

But the drama we witnessed this evening is not the end of the story. What we saw tonight was the momentous disruption of God choosing to dwell among us to save us, the turning point in our story as we head to the inevitable conclusion when God's

kingdom fully arrives on earth as in heaven. It is the response to this disruption that makes all the difference: the pondering of Mary, the awe and wonder of the people, the joy and hope of the shepherds. The brokenness of the world didn't change...they changed...and, in being changed they can now choose to work alongside this Saviour to change the world.

Advent and Christmas are seasons of hope amid much fear and despair. The arrival of new life in Christ fills us with hope and reminds us that life triumphs in the midst of death and death-dealing structures of the empire. We are given the opportunity to ponder the cosmic event and to choose our response.

"There was once a small Christmas pageant at a small church in which the part of the innkeeper was played by a high school student. He was shy and awkward, easily overlooked despite being very tall. He was very quiet and polite. When Joseph and Mary appeared at the inn, he stood...awkwardly...in the doorway, slumping a bit toward the couple as they made their request for lodging. He then dutifully recited his one line, 'There is no room in the inn.' But, as Mary and Joseph turned and walked wearily away toward the cattle stall where they would spend the night, the boy continued to watch them with eyes filled with compassion. Suddenly responding to a grace which, though not part of the script, filled the moment, he startled himself, the holy couple, and the audience, calling, 'Wait a minute, don't go. You can have my room'" (p.42-43, *Shepherds and Bathrobes*).

The light of the world was born this night. The response to the light matters. As the curtain closes on the joyful faces of the shepherds, let us choose their path, going back to our homes glorifying and praising God. Let the disruption begin.