

“Christmas Jesus” GPPC 12-24-15
Isaiah 9:2-7, Luke 2:1-20

Some folks have rented highway billboards (one of them along I-40 near Greensboro). These signs feature Santa Claus proclaiming the jolly news, “Go ahead and skip church! Just be good for goodness’ sake. Happy Holidays!” But here you are sitting in the pews. You rebels, you! Santa’s not bossing you around, huh.

Professor Tom Long says, “In the film comedy ‘Talladega Nights,’ ... Will Ferrell, playing the part of racecar driver Ricky Bobby, always begins his table blessings and other prayers by appealing to the ‘Lord baby Jesus.’ At one point, his wife, Carley, calls him on this.

“‘Hey, um, you know, sweetie,’ she says, ‘Jesus did grow up. You don’t always have to call him, ‘baby.’

“Ricky [answers], ‘Well, I like the Christmas Jesus best and I’m saying grace.’” (Thomas G. Long, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, Nov. 23, 1015, 11.)

Hey. You defied Santa and we *do* like the Christmas Jesus. So let’s say some grace.

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Luke tells us how grace was said 2000 years ago. The Emperor Augustus had sent out a decree, not a suggestion, but a decree “that all the world should be registered.” Emperor Augustus (who apparently thought he ruled the whole world) demanded that the oppressed people under his thumb, um, I mean his loyal and adoring subjects would return to their hometowns for the census.

Now maybe this sounds innocuous enough. But the census would’ve been used to raise taxes on people who were already overtaxed and barely getting by. It might’ve been employed to conscript men into military service. So the emperor’s power seems impressive, but as we’ve noted before, Luke is setting us up to see the real power, not the emperor’s pretend power. Luke is saying that Mister-Bigshot-Everybody-Quivers-Before-Me Emperor was actually just a pawn of the living God. The emperor unwittingly caused Mary and Joseph to go to Bethlehem so that the prophecy of scripture might be fulfilled.

It wasn’t easy for Mary and Joseph, of course. Travel was difficult enough already, and to be pregnant just added to the trouble of it all. Being an engaged, but unwed mother probably didn’t help either.

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They finally did get to Bethlehem, and Luke says Mary gave birth to her child and laid him in a manger. The manger was probably a feeding trough in a room attached to the house, a place where livestock would be brought during the night for safety and warmth. There was no room for Mary and Joseph “in the inn,” better translated no room in the *guest room*. So the extra room for livestock had to do. We guess this was not the birth place Joseph and Mary had envisioned for their firstborn baby. But it was enough. And it forever reminds us that the One we call Lord was born not in a shimmering palace, not in the Lincoln bedroom, not in a disinfected hospital birthing suite, but in a simple room where people might’ve stored some farm equipment and kept their prized livestock at night. Our Lord was born in humility and with God’s humble creatures all around.

Speaking of humble creatures, Luke tells us there were shepherds living out in the fields, taking care of their sheep that night. You may remember that the shepherds, like Mary and Joseph, were blue collar workers, not the upper crust of Roman society. They were just ordinary folks going about their jobs working the night shift. “Samuel, would you

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bring me another cup of coffee, please? I'm getting sleepy watching these sheep. Maybe I'll just count 'em and see what happens."

And then all heaven broke loose.

Without warning an angel, a messenger from God stood before them and God's glory shone all around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said what angels specialize in saying, "Don't be afraid." Almost every time they show up, that's what angels say, "Don't be afraid." It's the most repeated command in all of the Bible. "Don't be afraid."

Why? "Because," said the angel, "I'm bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. To you is born this day in David's city a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

Now maybe the shepherds had heard something similar whenever a future Roman Emperor was born. "Good news of great joy." Yeah. Right. But it was never good news for *all* the people. It was always just good news for a few lucky people, a few well-placed people.

This time the good news of great joy was truly for all the people because the One who had just been born would save the people *from*

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their sins and save the people *for* service to God. The One who had just been born was the long-awaited Messiah, the Christ anointed to bring in God's shalom. And the One who had just been born was none other than the Lord of heaven and earth. Hard to believe, but the One just born was all that and more.

Presbyterian writer Anne Lamott says, "When God is going to do something wonderful, [God] always starts with hardship; when God is going to do something amazing, [God] starts with an impossibility."

(Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, 33-34.)

It is an impossibility and it is amazing. How can a baby born to a couple of working stiffs in a Podunk first century town save the world? How can a poor little baby laid in a manger be the Messiah of God's peace? How can a baby with no political clout be Lord of the Universe? It is an impossibility and it is amazing.

And to top it off, the angel says the sign that this is all true is "a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." That's what the shepherds are invited to go see. Nothing spectacular, just something

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beautiful, a baby lying in a feeding trough. As Dostoevsky said, “Beauty will save the world.” There’s your sign.

Writer Maggie Ross says, “Faith is not about suspending critique but exercising it as it issues from a silent space of love, a reality yet unseen...” (Maggie Ross in *Weavings*, Jan./Feb. 2006, 14.)

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Colombia, South America has been engaged in armed conflict since the mid-1960s. Not only have government forces been clashing with organized crime, but also with paramilitary and guerilla groups with various political objectives. One of the groups fighting the government is the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC. These rebels hidden deep in the jungle have been battling with the government forces for decades with little progress toward peace.

But desperate folks in Colombia turned to a strange strategy that’s working as peace is on the horizon. They employed an international advertising agency to try to break through to the guerillas. Several different ad campaigns were built around a common theme. As PRI

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writes, “Leaders believe [the] rebel soldiers, isolated in the jungle, are lonely and homesick during the Christmas season. So the message of the ad campaign is simple: ‘Guerrillas. In this Christmas, follow the light that will guide you to your family and freedom. Demobilize! Everything is possible during Christmastime.’ ...

“[During] ‘Operation Christmas,’ teams installed nine Christmas trees near where guerrillas moved soldiers and supplies. At night, the trees displayed a message in lights: ‘If Christmas can come to the jungle, you can come home. Demobilize.’ Another time, [and Greensboro people are going to love this] the agency designed floating Christmas balls with blue LED lights that contained personal messages from the guerrillas' family and friends, inviting them to come home. The balls were floated down rivers toward the rebels.

“[And] the latest outreach effort features...mothers whose sons have been recruited by [the rebels] against their will. The mothers shared snapshots of their children and recorded personal messages to them, asking them to consider coming home...TV and radio ads and

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posters...say ..."Before you were a guerrilla, you were my son."

<http://www.pri.org/stories/2013-12-16/colombias-government-has-christmas-message-farc-rebels-come-home>

God sent Jesus, God's Son into the world at Christmas. And through him God will save us *from* our sins and save us *for* serving God. God will usher in the promised shalom that even now we catch glimpses of, even in the jungle. And God will guide us to follow the light and find our way home.

Faith issues from a silent space of love, a reality unseen. Everything is possible during Christmastime. Beauty will save the world. And when God is going to do something amazing, God starts with the impossible.

What struggles do you and I face this night? Whatever challenges we face, whatever challenges the world faces, the message is still for us. Do not be afraid. God is with us. God loves us. God will help us.

Do not be afraid. Behold! I bring you good news of great joy for all the people, *all* the people. To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace. Peace. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal