

BETHLEHEM PRAYER SERVICE SERMON

Text: Luke 2:1-7

Washington National Cathedral

Saturday, December 20, 2014

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*“In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.”*

Brothers and sisters,

The Christmas story is embedded in a story about empire.

St. Luke dates the birth of our Lord by reference to the Emperor Augustus, by reference to the claim that “all the world should be registered.” It is the nature of empire that its claims are universal, it is the nature of empire to believe that a certain kind of order is essential. The Emperor Augustus wants to know how many people live in his empire and where they belong. Moving around is legal, but it is not encouraged, which is why everyone is meant to return to the family’s original home, and why Joseph and Mary go back to Bethlehem, the city of David, their ancestor.

Ultimately there is money involved here. Behind all the registration of people is the updating of the financial records. That’s why the older English translations of Luke said the emperor had decreed that all the world should be taxed.

The empire is not always evil, it does not ask always to be loved or even always to be noticed. But it intends to be obeyed. Pregnant as Mary is, she and Joseph go to Bethlehem because that is what the empire demands.

This story about empire, about power working from a distance to control people’s lives, is familiar still today. People throughout all the world in our time live as they do, go where they go, suffer as they suffer because of decisions made far away by strangers. People’s political fate is determined by leaders of other nations. People’s economic life is judged on the basis of how much they can contribute to a kind of international well-being that may not actually include them.

On the borders of our country this summer we saw how thousands of children can be just tossed around in the world by violence and poverty in their homelands. On the borders of Palestine and Israel other pain and other grief continues because the world at large mostly finds it unprofitable to get involved.

We live now under an empire made up of governments and institutions and businesses and media outlets, all empowered by the decisions we make every day. Our empire wants us to be entertained and distracted, wants us to postpone anything painful, wants us to think of ourselves

as consumers, wants us to be afraid of other people. The empire under which we live is not always evil, it does not want to be noticed. But it intends to be universal, and what it cannot control it eventually tries to destroy.

The story of Christmas is always embedded in a story about empire, but empire is not as powerful as the power that Christmas reveals.

In Bethlehem, in a quiet town where average people lived average lives and where a sudden group of travelers had taken every spare room, God was born as a tiny baby. God took on all the weakness of the human experience, right here in this very world. In Bethlehem, a real place you can still go and see, God challenged the powers that be in this world simply by not becoming one of them.

Not even in proper baby clothes but in torn strips of fabric, not even in a proper bed but in a manger where the animals have eaten, God is at work here claiming the world.

And God's claim is based not on the power to coerce or to control us but on the power that shapes us with our consent into walking, talking images of God's love, for the sake of our neighbors and for the sake of the world.

In the baby Jesus God is saying "no" to every form of pretense and pride, "no" to every form of worldliness that thinks it is sufficient for itself. In the baby Jesus, we see the lengths to which God will go to get our attention, the passion God has for being one of us.

Our stories are always part of the Christmas story. At Christmas we are always invited again to remember where our true allegiance lies.

The world around us has many ways to make us its own, and awakening our hatreds may be the worst of those ways. The empire of our culture that wants our service perhaps corrupts us worst when it inspires in us the sense of self-righteousness anger and despair. The call of Christmas is always to remember that we are sisters and brothers of a mighty Lord who will cloak his power in weakness.

In Bethlehem, where the celebration of this Lord is still surrounded by constraint and persecution; in Washington, D.C., where self-importance and frustration both seem to be part of the air we breathe; in both our places we cry out for God to show us how to be brave and trusting. In both our places we cry out for God to remake our world by remaking us first, so we can make the right kinds of sacrifices and offer the right kind of praise.

Separated as we are this morning by half the world, we acknowledge that we are one in the service of the Christ Child and that in his service, we have found our true humanity and all our hope for God's future.

May God bless us and all the world in these holy days, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus now and forever. *Amen*