

Sermon: Living with Emperors, Singing with Grace

Year A, Christmas Eve

[Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14, \(15-20\)](#)

Offered December 24, 2019 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered (Luke 2:1). We have all been there. You don't even have your coat off at work and there's an all staff email. Your kid is emptying her backpack in the kitchen and one of the papers says "To: All Parents and Guardians". You open the letter from the bank and it says, "In an effort to serve you better ...". We have all been there. We look at it and we know that a decree has come out from the Emperor. It may make no sense in our little world. It may require an enormous amount of effort on our part to comply with it. But it is a decree and it's from the Emperor, and there is no one who is interested in hearing how ridiculous it is.

And if there was only one emperor and if he sent out decrees so rarely that they have to provide some context, "You know back when Quirinius was the governor of Syria. No, no, not the second registration, the first one." If there was only one emperor who didn't have a ton of decrees, maybe we could deal with it. But there seem to be a million emperors: one at work, another at each of kid's schools, another at the bank. All these emperors make all their decrees and there is no appeal. There is no place for our voice to be heard, saying "Wait a minute. It makes no sense to take time off work to drag my pregnant wife from one end of the country to the other for a little paperwork. If you want me to pay more in taxes, you have to let me stay at work to earn the money."

Amen. I get it. Me too. But it might be worth our notice to see that the biggest message in this whole story is a tiny baby. Everyone in this room has been a baby at one point or another. It's a pretty ordinary thing. God sends this baby right in the middle of all the chaos that the Emperor has caused. God doesn't compete with the emperor decree vs. decree. God shows up in the middle of daily living. And God shows up in a way we know what to do with and how to handle. God shows up in a way that we might not even notice.

God is bringing newness into the world, but God is doing it in a way we can incorporate into our worldly lives. After the big snow storm at the beginning of the month, someone helped me clear off my car. Someone else helped pick up a package for me. I was trying to turn left and there was no way I was going to get out, so I did a 3 point turn (ok, a 7 point turn) and went another way. The person behind me waiting to turn right backed up a little and gave me a wave went I got headed in the other direction. They're all little things. And you can certainly say that people were just being nice. I don't disagree. But why not also see God's loving kindness at work there too?

If we are going to wait for angels and heavenly choirs, we're going to spend a long time waiting for God. But if we're willing to work with God a little, if we're willing to see the little sparks of light and love that are signs of God's grace, then we begin to see God's kingdom emerging around us.

The point of Jesus coming into the world as a regular little baby is not that God is capable of doing amazing things. We know that. *Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light.* (Genesis 1:3). Right? Come back at Easter and I'll have another amazing story to tell you about an empty tomb and a man raised from the dead. The point of Jesus coming into the world as a

regular little baby is that Almighty God is capable of walking through this world with us. God is capable of showing up in all the small ways that make this tough and challenging life full of petty emperors and their unending decrees bearable.

And even when God shows up through an angel, standing before us, and the glory of the Lord shines around us and scares us absolutely to death, even then, what God says is “Heads up. Something new is happening right now, in your home town and here’s how you can tell you’ve found the right tiny baby.” God doesn’t tell the shepherds to do anything. They decide that they need to head to Bethlehem to see what’s going on. And for Mary and Joseph who have this new baby boy that has arrived under really trying circumstances, it must be kind of surprising, but kind of nice to have total strangers say that their kid is going to be great joy for all people.

We’re here in church on a night when frankly we all have approximately 7,239 other things to do because years and years ago a perfectly ordinary baby was born. That baby grows up and reassures us that God is with us, now, today, in our hometown, in the middle of our daily lives. That baby grows up and assures us that he *is with us always, to the end of the age*. (Matthew 28:20) That baby grows up and assures us that he will return. We can trust that promise because he came the first time, all those years ago.

So we are living in the period between God’s past appearance in this world and God’s next one. But all the while, God is with us, in the small moments that we tend to overlook because we’re so busy dealing with the decrees from all the different emperors who complicate our lives. Maybe that makes sense to you. Maybe that doesn’t. Maybe you’d like it to make sense to you, but it doesn’t seem like logic is going to get it done.

Let me point this out. When another angel first came to Mary and told her she was pregnant, she didn’t understand it, but she sang a magnificent song. When the angels came to the shepherds and told them that the Messiah had been born in the city of David, they didn’t understand it. But they went home singing.

The world of the emperors can only offer guilt and judgment, compulsion and hostility.¹ And none of us can see how that could ever change. And then God sends an ordinary, tiny baby and suddenly there is a new song in this world. That song is sung by the hopeless who have been silenced by all the decrees that surround them. That song releases something that the emperors can neither create themselves or prevent from coming into being. This new thing cannot be logically explained, because we’d need to use the categories and explanations that the emperors base their decrees on. This new thing, [this hope that is born this night]/[this great glad tidings tell] comes precisely to those whose voices have been choked off by the heavy chain of decrees we are forced to bear. But even today, we can be like Mary and Joseph, be like the shepherds. We will keep on living our lives figuring out how best to manage all the emperors’ decrees. But we’ll live it singing, full of amazement we can neither explain nor understand, surrounded on all sides and at every moment by the grace notes of God’s loving presence.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 104.