

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Advent Midweek 1
Wednesday, December 5th, 2018

Sermon: In Those Days: A Decree Went Out¹

Text: Luke 2:1-3

Focus: Jesus' birth took place in real history in the geo-political context of Roman Empire.

Function: That they would pray for and obey their leaders.

Structure: Story-Applied

Locus: "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise our parents and other authorities, but honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them" (SC, 4th Commandment).

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen. "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town" (Luke 2:1-3, ESV).² So begins the Christmas story from Luke 2, the narrative we call the Nativity. The birth of Jesus Christ took place in real human history, not "a long time ago in a land far, far away." The birth of Christ is history, not a fairytale, as I like to point out each year. Christmas really happened!

Jesus was probably born in 4 B.C., based on the mention of Quirinius. Caesar Augustus, of course, was the first Roman Emperor. Prior to his coronation, he was known as Octavius, the nephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar, the famous Roman general who was assassinated by Brutus and Cassius on the floor of the Roman Senate after declaring himself to be Dictator for Life. Caesar Augustus coinage declared him to be "the Savior of the World" and "the son of a god," his uncle Julius having been deified by the Roman Senate after his death. And yet in our Gospel reading, Caesar is more like a footnote in the far greater story of the birth of Christ.

¹ This sermon is developed from the sermon series, "In Those Days" by Creative Communications for the Parish.

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

But before all the business of angels and shepherds came into view, there was the matter of Caesar's census, or "registration," as it is called in the English Standard Version. Caesar decreed a census of his empire. And in the ancient world, as now, there was really only one good reason to count people: in order to make them pay taxes!

Jews living at the turn of the millennium were a subjugated people living under the thumb of the Romans. While living in their own country, they were forced to pay taxes to support the army of foreign occupiers. To say the least, it was not a popular enterprise. Popular unrest and instability plagued the census. You might say that Caesar's census was the original "taxation without representation," which the American colonists decried in the runup to the Revolution. None of the Jews wanted to pay taxes to the Romans.

And, as if to make the matter even more contentious, many pious Jews regarded any kind of census to be an affront to heaven itself. Many of them knew their history and remembered how the Lord punished King David for taking a census of Israel in 1 Chronicles 21. In his pride, David ordered a census for the purpose of military conscription. But because the Lord had not commanded the census, 70,000 people died of disease until David repented and offered sacrifice. No doubt this troubling history was in the back of their minds as the Jews went each to his hometown in order to be counted and taxed.

We also live in turbulent times marked by deep political divisions and distrust of people with different beliefs, opinions, and points of view. We even have the 2020 census looming on the horizon! While our leaders may not call themselves gods, there's certainly enough demagoguery and corruption to go around on both the Right and the Left. Jewish zealots do not terrorize our polling stations, we are astonished and fearful of mass shootings in schools,

churches, synagogues, and shopping malls, which have become so common, it's hard to keep count.

Because our society is increasingly hostile to Christianity, and many of our leaders are poor moral examples, it would be easy for us to say that we don't support our government. We might even withdraw from involvement in civil society, like the Mennonites do, and say that Christians can't be involved in politics or public service because it's just too dirty. Some people might even go so far as to refuse to pay taxes, arguing that the government uses our money for wicked, sinful purposes that we don't agree with or believe in.

But that's not how God tells us to live in this world. As Christians, it is true that "our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil. 3:20). We are strangers and foreigners on earth. Yet the Scriptures tell us that all governments are ordained by God, and God expects us to obey the government, pay our taxes, and pray for our leaders (Rom. 13:1-10; 1 Tim. 2:1-2). "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Luke 20:25).

We see a wonderful example of this in the Holy Family. Mary and Joseph journeyed to Bethlehem to pay taxes to an unpopular, foreign occupier. They did not shirk their duty, no matter how chagrined they felt about it. Martin Luther commends them for this in his little Christmas book:

"The birth of Christ was timed to coincide with the census because God wanted to teach us the duty of obedience even to a heathen government.... This is the strongest proof that Christ's Kingdom is to be distinguished from that of the world.... Christ [and his family] obeyed the civil government of the emperor. Every Christian, therefore, should let August administer his realm—should not hinder but help."³

³ Martin Luther, *The Martin Luther Christmas Book*, trans. and ed. Roland H. Bainton (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1948), 35.

The Holy Family obeyed the Roman emperor and paid their taxes. Christ himself would submit to a Roman governor and die on the cross to forgive the sins of the whole world, including yours and mine! His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). And yet we pray that his kingdom would come here on earth, as it is in heaven.

The 2018 mid-term elections are over. But our nation is still divided by political rivalry, anger, and distrust. Rather than lambasting our leaders or painting our political opponents as the enemy, let us pray for them and ask God to help even presidents, senators, and governors to repent and be saved. Christ was born for us. And he was born for them. His kingdom of grace is for all who are willing to humble themselves and believe in the name of Jesus, our coming King!

Someday Christ will come again. “Of the increase of the government and of peace there will be no end...” (Isa. 9:7a). That is why he is called the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6).

Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.