

“**In those days** a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.” Now, as we begin to ponder this cherished and treasured story, I am going to say something that just may shatter all your preconceived notions about this reading. I must tell you, there is no historical evidence that this census, as told by the writer of Luke’s gospel, ever took place. And, furthermore, unless there is something we do not know, the writer of Luke’s gospel also seems to be incorrect about Quirinius or Herod or both because the traditional dating of the birth of Jesus would locate it during the reigns of **neither** Herod the Great **nor** Quirinius. So, what is going on here? Well, Luke is **not** interested in giving us an accurate historical account of Jesus’ birth because he **is** interested in proclaiming a much deeper truth, a truth that is full of wonder and awe.

Luke gives us this information, not as history, but as a theological work to tell the story of One who has come into this world to change and quite literally shatter the status quo. The writer of Luke’s gospel gives us this information as a way of setting the political and social context for the appearance of this One we call Jesus and the astonishing, awesome arrival of a brand-new world. The story begins, “**In those days...**” It begins by denoting a time of census taking and taxes, a time of authoritative orders

and pronouncements. Luke begins by telling of a time shaped by business as usual in a world that is organized by accepted oppressive power structures, a world where those in power work to maintain the tired and hopeless status quo. Luke begins by telling about manifest Roman political power, the power of empire and the political elite. Luke begins by naming the way political, economic and social forces shape our lives and minds and hearts to the point where we think that is the only reality. That is the story of the world, that is the human story, the story of our human predicament. That is the story of **“in those days.”**

The writer of Luke’s gospel begins telling the story of the status quo, tired and hopeless, business as usual human predicament **“in those days.”** **so that** we can begin to grasp the earth shattering, awe inspiring, news that is announced about **“This day...!”** You see, a new time, a whole new age, has entered the world on **“this day...”** in the form of a small, vulnerable baby. And, this **new** time is characterized not by the drudgery of business as usual or the threat of imperial power, but by the inbreaking of the heavenly realm, the wonder of the songs of angels, and the “good news of great joy for **all** people!” Quite honestly, from the viewpoint of the emperor – the viewpoint of the “powers that be” – the good news of what has happened on **this day** may even be treasonous. For **“this day”** has a

political dimension; this **new** time is a direct challenge to the imperial world of “**in those days.**” There is a **new** Savior, a title formerly reserved only for the emperor. And, this **new** Savior comes in the form of a vulnerable little baby, as God is birthing a **whole new creation.** In the ordinary birth of a vulnerable baby, comes the extraordinary wonder of God becoming flesh – Immanuel, God with us. Can you now begin to grasp the wonder and magnitude of this earth shattering news?

On this night, the news we receive is earth shattering and scandalous. We dare not forget the scandal and magnitude of this earth shattering news, the news of both the cradle and the cross. We dare not be lulled by our culture’s attempts to sentimentalize Christmas. We all do it and to be honest, it even happens in the church.

Think for a moment about how our own hymnody conspires to tame this festival day into something more palatable and ... dare we even say ... *nice*. Consider the opening of the beloved carol *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, “O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.” Lovely words from Phillips Brooks. But, if we think about the tumultuous history of the Middle East, imagining Bethlehem as peaceful more expresses a longing than an historical reality. And what about *Away In A Manger* telling us, “The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus no crying

he makes?” No crying? Any nurse or doctor would call that a zero on the Apgar score and would start resuscitation attempts immediately. Seriously, while we need these images to help us ponder the wonder and mystery of this night, they also may just be conspiring to sentimentalize the scandal and earth shattering nature of Christmas. Between sentimentality, emotional burdens, and unrealistic cultural expectations, perhaps we need this child of God to shatter and shake up what we’ve made of Christmas. In fact, we need to really listen to the words and fury of the song the choir just sang:

This little Babe so few days old, is come to rifle Satan’s fold;  
All hell doth at his presence quake, though he himself for cold do shake;  
For in his weak unarmed wise the gates of hell he will surprise.

The reality is we come together this night to pay honor to the One who subversively came to shatter and change everything! This child’s birth was the plan of a subversive God who snuck into the back door of history on a mission to truly change the world, to truly change creation. Coming as one of us – vulnerable, poor, and powerless – he came to upend the world as we have constructed it.

He came to shatter our selfishness and narcissism, so that we might be able to love God and others and to receive that love in return. He came to shatter our fear of death, so that we might be able to live more fully and

freely in this life. He came to shatter and change the political systems which choose who is in and who is out, so that **all** of God's children would be included in the kingdom. He came to shatter our tendency of tribalism, pitting one group against another. He came to change our economy of values to build a different one based on valuing the eternal rather than things that pass away. He came to change our ideas of family to embrace a wider vision of God's family, which includes **all** people, not just the ones like us. He came to shatter the old regimes of "in those days," and bring in a whole new regime. Yes, he came to shatter every structure we try to build which puts us first at the expense of everyone else. He came to change **us** and he calls **us** to follow in his path.

This is no small thing. For 2000 plus years, people have come together to mark the birth of Christ as God's subversive way of dwelling among us, shattering our preconceived notions and changing everything for the sake of bringing about something greater than we could ask for or imagine. Tonight, we come together to celebrate this subversive God and mark a vision of the kingdom of God unfolding right here in our midst. And we do this because to you is born **this day** a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. May the wonder and mystery of this holy child shatter, disrupt and change your life, and bring you renewed hope on **this day**, so that the

grace of God might be planted in your heart and you may more deeply  
come to know Christ's love.