

Tonight's gospel reading begins with three very important words: **In those days!** “**In those days** a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that **all** the world should be registered.” As we think about this treasured story, I am going to say something that just may shatter some of your preconceived notions. I must tell you, there is **no** historical evidence that this decree, as told by Luke, ever took place. And, unless there is something we do **not** know, the writer of Luke's gospel also seems to be incorrect about Quirinius or Herod the Great or both because 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 an **historical** account of Jesus' birth because he **is** interested in proclaiming a much **deeper** truth!

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**. Luke's gospel, more than any of the other gospels, addresses the social, cultural, and political environment. So, Luke gives us **this** information as a way of setting the **political** and **social context** for the coming appearance of this One we call Jesus and the astonishing, **awesome** arrival of a **brand-new world**. Luke begins with “**In**

those days...” as he depicts a time of census taking and taxes, a time of authoritative orders and pronouncements, a time shaped by business as usual in a world organized by accepted oppressive power structures, a world where those in power work to maintain the tired and hopeless status quo. The setting of Luke’s version of the Jesus story begins in the **context** of manifest political power, a context that, quite frankly, describes almost **any** time in history. Luke names the status quo way political, economic, and social forces shape **our** lives and **our** minds and **our** hearts to the point where we think that is the **only** reality. You see, **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.**”

Yes, this gospel begins by naming the story of the status quo, tired and hopeless, business as usual human predicament of “in **those** days.” **so that** we can begin to grasp the earth-shattering 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 most unexpected way – 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!” 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 baby, as God is birthing a **whole new creation.** **This new day** brings the **extraordinary** wonder of **God becoming flesh** – Immanuel, God with us. Can you now begin to grasp the magnitude of this earth-shattering news?

Friends, on **this** night, the news we receive is astounding, and we dare not forget the scandal and magnitude of this news, 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 more feel good. 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 a 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 soften and sentimentalize the scandal and earth-shattering nature of Christmas. Between sentimentality, emotional burdens, the pain so many are presently feeling, and unrealistic cultural expectations, perhaps we need this child of God to shake up what we have made of Christmas.

Friends, the reality is we come together this night to pay honor to our God who subversively came to change **everything!** And, how does God create this earth-shattering disruption? By bringing unconditional, transformational **love** to the world. This subversive God snuck into the back door of history on a mission to truly disrupt and **change** the world by turning **our** lives inside out and upside down with a **love** that truly changes **us**, a love that can transform everything and everyone. Coming as one of **us** – vulnerable, poor, and powerless – he came to upend the world as **we** have constructed it by bringing **love** into the world, a **love** the world would otherwise have never known.

He came to shatter our selfishness and narcissism, so that we might be able to love God and **others**. 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 that choose who is in and who is out, so that we might embrace a wider vision the human family and

discover that God's family includes **all** people. He came to shatter our tendency of tribalism, something we presently see pushed to the extreme as it pits one group against another. He came to change our economy of values to build a different one based on valuing the eternal and life that truly matters. 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 **him**.

This is no small thing. For 2000 plus years, people have gathered to mark the birth of Christ as God's subversive way of dwelling among us. Tonight, as we gather in the darkness of this pandemic, even if our gathering is online, we gather 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, Christ the Lord. May the wonder and mystery of this holy child disrupt and change your life, and bring you **renewed hope** not only on **this day**, but on **every** day as we move forward into yet another year. And, may the grace and love of this child be planted in your heart so that you may more deeply come to know how immeasurably **you** are loved by the God of all creation!