

Christmas Eve, December 24

Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Luke 2:1-14; Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14. We are all familiar with the Christmas story, as told by Luke – perhaps, too familiar because its very familiarity lulls us to rest in its beauty while no longer hearing the shocking truth of its presentation. We tend to hear the Christmas story within a sentimentalized understanding of the holiday that evokes warm memories of Santa Claus, White Christmases and chestnuts roasting on an open fire! What we need to rediscover, however, is that Luke’s telling of the birth of Jesus is a carefully crafted story that fits like a glove the dominant theme of that Gospel – that Jesus came to proclaim and to inaugurate the Jubilee of Israel and for the world.

The primary theme of Luke is Jesus’ reclaiming and acting out the Jubilee of God, and thereby bringing a great reversal to the economic, political and spiritual life of Israel and of the world. Jesus came proclaiming that God’s true Jubilee was coming to both Israel and the world through his person and ministry (Luke 4:17-18).

The Jubilee was a legislated reversal of fortune in which every fifty years the land of Israel was to lie fallow, all debts were to be cancelled, all slaves were to be set free and each family was to regain possession of their ancestral land (Lev. 25:8-55). When it was observed, Jubilee was designed so that wealth couldn’t accumulate and power accrue in the hands of an elite few, but would rather be redistributed so that all the people of Israel would live in justice, with an equitable share of the wealth, so that poverty would be eliminated and all would live in relationship with God. It was God’s way of remaking Israel into the world as God intended it to be. But Jubilee had not been observed in its entirety for at least 400 years, and Israel consequently lived in great poverty with only a select few living in wealth, power and in control of the nation’s religious institution.

Thus, the primary theme of the Gospel of Luke is that Jesus has come to bring God’s society back to Israel and Israel back to God. Jesus will accomplish this by bringing about a great reversal in the economic, political and spiritual life of the nation. That great reversal would occur through Israel fully embracing the Jubilee. This reversal would be attempted through Jesus’ intervention as Messiah – through his ministry, his empowering of the poor and marginalized, his confronting of the powerful representatives of the systems, their rejection of him, and his consequent suffering, death and resurrection. If the powerful would embrace that Jubilee, then Israel would return to being God’s kingdom. If they did not, then God would create a new people through Jesus that would be a Jubilee people (Acts 2:14-47). That theme is “overtured” through Luke’s Christmas story.

Luke’s Christmas story begins with the angel Gabriel being sent to Nazareth to tell a 12- to 14-year-old virgin that she is about to become pregnant without having had sexual intercourse with a man – and that her baby “will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David” (1:32).

This story is filled with astounding Jubilee themes of liberation. First, the angel speaks to a woman about this most awesome event – not to a man. Second, she is not even a mature woman, but a mere girl – just entering adolescence and still a virgin. Third, she is given the privilege and

right to refuse the angel's proposal – that is the honor bestowed upon her. But in faith believing, she accepts it. “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (1:38).

Mary sings a hymn of praise to God in her visit with her cousin Elizabeth, who is also experiencing a miracle pregnancy. We tend to read the Magnificat (1:46-55), concentrating on its opening lines because those lines center on God's graciousness in selecting Mary to be the mother of the Messiah. But note the last lines of the Magnificat:

“The Mighty One . . . has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever” (1:51-55).

Here is the Jubilee reversal of fortune, voiced by a pregnant peasant girl. In the birth of her son, the powerful are to be brought low, the oppressed freed from tyranny, the wealthy emptied, the destitute “filled with good things”. The Upside-Down Kingdom is being proclaimed through Mary's song!

The story then moves to Jesus' birth. Government tyranny forces Jesus' pregnant mother and his stepfather to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem at the height of Mary's pregnancy. There, they find no room and so must bed down in a stable as Mary begins her labor. The savior of the world is wrapped in “swaddling cloths” and laid in a manger. It is a romantic picture, but it was not a romantic reality. Luke means to paint as harsh a picture as possible. It is shepherds, it is women and orphans, it is the destitute, it is the expendables, the untouchables who bed down in a stable. It is such poor people whose babies are born there and who are laid in a manger, wrapped with whatever cloth might be at hand. Jesus, the king of the world, is being born as the lowliest of peasants. The cognitive dissonance of this story must have struck the first Christians with unbelievable force.

Then comes the high point of the Christmas story. Angels appear to shepherds watching their flocks in the fields and proclaim “good news of great joy” for “born this day in the city of David is a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord”. The angels sing, “Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth, peace among those whom he favors!” The shepherds, obviously, leave their flocks and run to the manger to view their Messiah (Luke 2:8-16).

The two important players in this portion of Luke's birth narrative are the shepherds and the angels. These two actors are crucial for grasping the Jubilee theme. Shepherds of Jesus' day were considered among the expendables of society; they were located near the bottom of the power scale, ranked only above lepers. Yet it is to shepherds that the angel appears to announce the birth of the one who will turn the kingdom upside-down. They are to be understood in contrast to the Emperor Augustus and Quirinius, the governor who had ordered the census. The high-and-mighty have unintentionally brought the Son of David to David's city for his coronation (birth). But the angels are appearing to the lowest of the low, announcing to them the good news of the coming of the Messiah. Good news comes to peasants; it doesn't come to the

powerful. The words of Mary's Magnificat, "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly" is being literally fulfilled through the birth of this baby.

The angels proclaim, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" And whom does God favor? Shepherds. A peasant mother. A carpenter father. Ox and ass, sheep and doves. The powerful are being ignored, and the lowly given access to the liberator king. And Jubilee is being literally initiated in front of our eyes!

"Joy to the world! The Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King,
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And heaven and nature sing."¹

Isaiah 9:2-7 predicts a truly Jubilee nation that will be brought about by God's choice of a particular king. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined" (9:2). That light is the birth of a king. "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us" (9:6a), and it will be that child who will bring to Israel the active possibility of living out the Jubilee in a nation that is equitable, just, free of poverty and in a dynamic loving relationship with God.

God, the prophet Isaiah predicts, will be the liberator of God's people through this king. The nation will grow under that king's care; they will live in shalom and in joy, experiencing plenty, justice, relationship with God and the elimination of poverty God (9:3). And they will have, not only internal justice, but will be freed from further invasion, conquest or domination by other nations (9:4).

This king, Isaiah tells us, is unlike any king Israel has had before – even David. For this king will build Israel into becoming, in its life together and for each individual, the Shalom Community – society as God intended it to be.

Isaiah writes, "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us. Authority rests upon his shoulders. And he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this" (Isa. 9:6-7).

The Messianic king who will be born to Israel will be unlike any who occupied the throne before him. The four royal names given to him express both his personal characteristics and the amazing quality of his reign.

Wonderful Counselor: the fount of wisdom in their midst who is "Wonderful in Purpose" who will govern his people with no thought to his own power or success, but simply concerned for their well-being;

¹ Isaac Watts, "Joy to the World", *The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration* (Waco, TX: Word Music, 1986), Hymn 125.

Mighty God: the great warrior who will protect his people so that no nation will dominate the country or will take away from them their privilege of living in shalom;

Everlasting Father: the One who will be as God to his people, who will incarnate to them God's profound love and watch-care for them;

Prince of Peace: the monarch who will build a government of shalom, so that all will live in economic equity while free of poverty, and who will live in justice while free of oppression.

In other words, what Isaiah is presenting here through these four titles is his insight that the Messianic king will be about the task of re-shaping Israel into God's intentions for the nation as given in the Law (especially in Deuteronomy) and called for by the prophets: a nation that is in a loving relationship with God and each other, practicing a politics of justice and an economics of equitable distribution of wealth in order to eliminate poverty. In other words, this king will bring his nation to the full practice of Jubilee!

But what kind of man can accomplish this? Such a king must be seen for what he actually is: a man who is more than a man, the man who is Immanuel – “God with us” – who will establish God's Jubilee kingdom both in Israel and to the uttermost parts of the earth.

“Even so, come, Lord Jesus!”

“He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love.”

Psalm 96 bears marked similarities with Psalm 98. Yet it is Psalm 96 that has been traditionally chosen to be used in conjunction with the story of the birth of Jesus and God's revelation of that birth with the angel choir. Why?

Both psalms are directed to the praise of God, and use strikingly similar language to conduct that praise. Both stress the creator role of God, rather than concentrating on his presentation of the Law to Israel. This, in turn, stresses the universality of God rather than his tribal emphasis. Both perceive God as a monarch, sitting in judgment (i.e., acting as a judge) towards his people. Both end with the same refrain – identical except for one word: “for he is coming to judge the earth, he will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth” (96:13; cf. 98:9 which uses “equity” instead of “truth”). Finally, both psalms begin with the same opening words, “O sing to the Lord a new song” but each diverts from there. Psalm 98 declares, “O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory” (98:1).

But Psalm 96 praises God in a way that centers on God's liberating action for all the nations of the world. “O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, bless

his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples. For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods” (96:1-4).

It is traditional for Psalm 96 to be used for Christmas Eve and the song of the angel choir. That is so because it reminds us that God is acting to do a new thing. And that new action is one of the bringing of truth, liberation and judgment upon the earth (according to what is appropriate), an action that “tells of his salvation from day to day, his glory among the nations”. “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those with whom he is well pleased!”

“Joy to the earth! The Savior reigns;
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods,
Rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy!”

Titus 2:11-14 proclaims that the grace of God has been initiated in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, and that grace has brought salvation to all who would receive it. That salvation, given us by Jesus, enables us to live “in the present age lives that are self-controlled, upright and godly” (vs. 12). But this is also a salvation for our future, as “we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (vs. 13). Thus, God has brought us Jubilee both now and for eternity through the intervention of Jesus Christ.

What is it that Christ has done for us that makes us right with God, with each other and with all society? Paul writes, “He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good works” (vs. 14). The Greek word here translated “redeem” means “to pay the cost for a prisoner’s release or a captive’s freedom”. It is, at one and the same time, both a legal term and an economic term. That is, Paul is stating that Jesus has acted, not just to set us free from the tyranny of our selfishness, lust for power and greed, but that he has done so by taking the burden of our guilt and shame upon himself.

Paul then states that Jesus’ redemption of us has occurred at two levels. First, he has redeemed us as individuals, in that he paid the price to free us from our sins. Second, he has transformed us into a new people – the shalom people, the Jubilee people. Redemption has been, not only for us as individuals, but for all of us as a people, as the church. His redemptive work has constituted us as a people who are both “of his own” (that is, who are embracing and living into the world as God intended it to be) and as “zealous for good works” – a people who live out being the Jubilee people by doing Jubilee in our political life, our economic actions, and in our nurturing of relationships with both humanity and with God.

Who, then, is this Jesus who is able to redeem us and make us into his Jubilee people? In our Epistle Lesson for today, Paul makes one of the clearest affirmations of the divinity of Christ that appears in scripture. He calls Jesus “our great God and Savior” (vs. 13b). Jesus is not only our

savior and liberator. He is “our great God”, as well. And it is because he is “our great God” that he can thereby be our savior, Messianic king, and the creator of his new Jubilee people.

‘No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground.
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.’

(Cycle C Advent Xmas Eve.doc)