

WHO RULES THE RULERS?

CHRISTMAS MESSAGE



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Luke 2:1-20

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About fifty years ago, when I was nine years old or thereabouts, I attended my first church service. My Little League coach, Jean Franceschi, who lived across the street from me, invited me. At the time, I thought it was a pretty good deal that my parents didn't make me go to church so that I could do what I wanted on Sunday mornings.

Nevertheless, I was intrigued by Mr. Franceschi's invitation. He said going to church would be good for me. Was he right? I guess I wanted to find out. So one Sunday morning, at the age of nine or so, I put on my Sunday-go-to-meetings, walked across the street to Mr. Franceschi's house, and headed off to St. Simon Catholic Church in Los Altos with him and his family.

Most of what I experienced at the Mass I didn't understand. That night I prayed to God, who I wasn't sure I believed in, trying to understand what it meant to believe in him. I now understand that God was reaching out to me through Mr. Franceschi's invitation and through my confusing experience at church that day.

One of the messages of the Christmas story is that God can use anything (including a seemingly confusing worship service!) to accomplish his purposes in the world and in our lives.

Caesar throws his weight around

Luke 2:1-7:

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 And all went to be registered, each to his own town. 4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. 6 And while they were there, the

time came for her to give birth. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In 31 B.C., after a bloody civil war, Octavian became the sole ruler of the known world. In 27 B.C. the Roman Senate gave him the title "Augustus," which before then had only been used of gods. An inscription found near Ephesus praises Augustus for ending war, hails him as "savior," and proclaims his birthday to be "the beginning of the good news for the world." ¹ Because his father, Julius Caesar, had been declared a god, Augustus called himself "son of a god." He was also called "Lord."

Well, Luke has already told us that Mary will give birth to a ruler who will be the Son of God, the Most High God, and that there will be no end to his kingdom (Luke 1:26-38). Before his account of the birth of this child is through, Luke will apply the words "Savior" and "Lord" to him and connect his reign to "peace." If you were to hear what was said about Caesar Augustus and read the Gospel of Luke, even just the first two chapters, you would know who Luke believes is the greater ruler. You'd know that Luke believes that the birth of Jesus marks the beginning of far greater news for the world than the birth of Caesar Augustus.

Caesar Augustus, though, can throw his weight around. To raise taxes, he can order a census and require "all the world" to register for the purpose of raising taxes, so he does. Even two people in a little village in the backwaters of the kingdom have to obey his commands, so they do. Joseph and Mary make the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, Joseph's ancestral home, to register. Mary is with child—the child we know to be, from Gabriel's appearance in Luke 1:26-38, the Son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit. Bethlehem is "the city of David," and we also know from Gabriel that the child in Mary's womb will receive "the throne of his father David."

What Caesar Augustus says goes. What he says, unbeknownst to him, also gets Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a village from which God said a ruler would emerge who would be “great to the ends of the earth” (Micah 5:2-5). Caesar can order his census, much to the chagrin of Israel, by the way, but God uses Caesar’s census to move a seemingly insignificant pregnant woman into place for the birth of the king of Israel, who will become the Lord of the whole world.

The word “inn” is the same word that is translated “guest room” in Luke 22:11. There was no room for Joseph and Mary in the guest room of this particular house, perhaps the house of a relative. The word translated “manger” is not a stable, a place for animals, but a feeding trough for animals. The feeding trough serves as a crib.

So where did Joseph and Mary stay? The likely conclusion is that they stayed in the main room with the family. One end of such a main room was a few feet lower, and animals were brought into this part of the room at night. Feeding troughs were placed at the edge of the upper part at the animals’ head level for convenient access. Thus, the child was likely born in the main room of a house and placed in a feeding trough, which was located in that room. Mary, in the manner of any mother of that time and place, wrapped her son in swaddling cloths.²

Why Luke gives us these details will become clear in the next scene.

God rules the rulers

When the rulers of this world throw their weight around, it should be comforting to know that God rules the rulers, even if they, like Caesar Augustus, consider themselves autonomous. God doesn’t necessarily rule the rulers by putting them in place, though sometimes he does. He doesn’t necessarily rule the rulers by willing their decrees, though sometimes he does. If the sovereignty of God—that is, his all-powerful, all-loving rule—means that he always puts rulers in place, even evil rulers, and that he always wills their decrees, even their evil decrees, then Jesus would have no need to instruct us to pray, “Your kingdom come, / your will be done / on earth as it is in heaven.” No, the sovereignty of God means that he draws up everything that the rulers of this world do, even their evil decrees, into his glorious purposes.

Both Paul and Peter command us to submit to governing authorities, even a pagan ruler such as Caesar (Romans 13:1-7, 1 Peter 2:13-17). We can do so especially because we know that God rules the rulers. Look what God did with a decree of a pagan ruler! He used it so that our Savior might be born in the right place at the right time.

There are many “rulers” in the lives of kids: parents, teachers, coaches, etc. At best, such rulers are doing their best. At worst, they’re tyrants. Even at their best, though, they are imperfect rulers. Sometimes, they abuse their authority. Sometimes, they make mistakes. The challenge therefore for children is to believe that God will use even the abuses and mistakes of these rulers for good in their lives.

The hope for imperfect parents, by the way, is that God will use even the mistakes they make for the benefit of our children. By no means does this give parents license to make mistakes. The apostle Paul anticipates our thinking: “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? 2 By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?(Romans 6:1-2) No, this gives parents reason to pray that God will use even their mistakes for good in the lives of their children.

The birth of Mary’s child creates quite a stir in heaven.

Keeping watch for wolves and robbers

Luke 2:8-15:

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. 10 And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

**14 “Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with
whom he is pleased!”**

15 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.”

On the one hand, shepherds are on a lower rung of the socio-economic ladder in their world. On the other hand, shepherds serve as models for leaders in Israel. Moses was a shepherd, as was David, who watched over his flock in the fields surrounding Bethlehem. In one of those fields, the shepherds are alerted concerning the birth of the one who will sit on David’s throne forever.

The shepherds are watching for wolves and robbers, but they’re not watching for what they see: an angel and the glory of the Lord, the visible, ruling presence of God, which accompanied Israel on its journey in the wilderness and which filled both the tabernacle and the temple. The glory of the Lord left the temple because of Israel’s persistent idolatry, but there was the hope that the glory of the Lord would return to his people (Ezekiel 11:22-23). Finally, the glory of the Lord returns—not to the temple, though, but to a field, and not to the leaders of Israel but to some lowly shepherds.

The shepherds know what to do when they see a wolf or a robber; they don’t know what to do when they see an angel and the glory of the Lord, so they’re afraid. The angel reassures the shepherds and conveys to them the “good news” of the birth of Christ, the Jewish Messiah. The Good News, or Gospel, in this case concerns the birth not of a Roman king but the birth of a Jewish king, the true “Savior” and “Lord.”

The Gospel message concerning the Christ will be complete after he has been crucified, resurrected, and enthroned in heaven on the throne of David. The Jewish king is greater than the Roman king because he will conquer not nations but Satan, sin, and death. Indeed, the birth of this king is “good news of great joy that will be for all the people”—that is, the people of Israel but also, eventually, all the people of the world. The Gospel is about a king who conquers evil.

When Mary wrapped her son in swaddling cloths and placed him in a feeding trough, she didn’t know that she was doing so as a sign so that shepherds could identify him as the Christ, but that’s exactly what she was doing. The shepherds were looking out for wolves and robbers; now they’re looking for the Savior, Christ the Lord!

Before the shepherds set out to find the new king, though, the angel is joined by a few friends. Well, more than a few.

A “multitude of the heavenly host,” constituting an angelic army, show up on the scene and breaks into praise. The birth of Christ inspires the highest praise for God. After all, he is the Most High, and the Son of the Most High has just been born (Luke 1:32). The birth of the Son of the Most High is especially praiseworthy because on earth it will mean “peace” among those with whom God is pleased: human wholeness in relationship with God and in relationship with others for the people of God. The birth of Christ affects both heaven and earth, and in the end, he will bring heaven and earth together (Ephesians 1:9-10, Revelation 21:1-22:5). Before he brings heaven and earth together, we have to believe that he will do so, and that he is doing so even now.

Signs of God’s sovereignty

Much of life consists of routine. We get up; go to work, school, or church; sit down to meals; spend time with family and friends. We plan our days, but, like the shepherds who watched over their flocks, we’re not planning for God to show up. We’re looking out for robbers and wolves, so to speak, or anything or anyone else that might cause us or those we love harm, but we’re not looking out for signs of God’s all-powerful, all-loving rule—for signs that he’s ruling over the rulers, for signs of his victory over evil, for signs that he is using evil for good.

Sometimes, though, God shows up: he gives us a sign of his sovereignty, just as he gave the shepherds a sign—in the middle of a field, in the middle of life. He shows us that he can be trusted, disturbing decrees and developments notwithstanding.

After the angels finish their song and depart for heaven, what remains for the shepherds to do but hightail it to Bethlehem?

The word confirmed

Luke 2:16-20:

And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. 17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. 18 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary

treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. 20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

When the angel Gabriel told Mary that she would bear the Christ child, she said “let it be to me according to your word.” Now the shepherds, who have also heard from an angel, literally make known “the word” from the angel to those present in the house. The word spoken to Mary—that the child she has birthed is the Christ—is confirmed by the shepherds for Mary, for Joseph, and for all who happen to be present.

Everyone, including Mary, wonders, or marvels, at the shepherds’ word, but Mary, true to form, goes a step further. Earlier, when the angel greeted her, she “tried to discern” the meaning of the greeting. Now, when she hears the shepherds convey what the angel has told them, she literally treasures “all these words” and ponders them. She hears the words of Gabriel and the words of the shepherds and she values them, even tucking them away in her heart for safekeeping and ongoing reflection. The shepherds were guarding the sheep they’ve been given; Mary guards the words she’s been given. The time will come when she will need those words in her heart because, according to Simeon, a sword will pierce her soul (Luke 2:35).

What the shepherds heard and saw in the fields has been confirmed by what they have seen in Bethlehem: the Christ has been born. The shepherds return to their fields, doing what the heavenly host did before them, “glorifying and praising God.” Will they ever be the same? Will they ever keep watch over their flock in the same way again? Will they remember, from time to time, the night that heaven came down and filled their souls? Will they keep watch not only for wolves and robbers but also for something else?

Treasure signs and watch for signs

How do we respond to the all-powerful, all-loving rule of God, especially now that he has conquered evil in the birth, death, and resurrection of his Son?

First, like Mary, treasure the signs of God’s sovereignty that you’ve been given. If God shows you his sovereignty in some way, through some sort of experience, insight, or Scripture that stops you in your tracks, spend some time in reflection, like Mary. Ponder what you have experienced in your heart. Tuck it away for safekeeping, so to speak. Why? Because you’ll need that experience, that insight, that Scripture later, when a sword pierces

your soul.

Children, your parents, and many people in this church, are pouring into your lives, even if, at times, you don’t want to be here, just like I didn’t want to be in church when I was a child. They’re teaching you the Scriptures, even if at times you don’t want to be taught. Let me assure you, though: you may feel that you don’t need what you’re being taught, but you will need it later. You will have much to draw on later in life when difficult times come—and they will come.

By the way, Jean Franceschi, my Little League coach, taught me much more than just baseball. I learned about discipline, courage, perseverance, and teamwork. I had no idea I was learning those things; I just thought I was having fun playing baseball. Only later did I realize that I was applying what Jean taught me to the rest of my life. He gave me much to draw on.

For example, Jean insisted that his players swing at anything close when they had two strikes against them. For him, there was nothing worse than standing at the plate, bat on shoulder, while the umpire called you out on a watched third strike instead of a swinging third strike. I was somewhat conflicted about his admonition to swing at anything close when we had two strikes on us, because for some players, letting every pitch go by was their best chance of getting on base. If the pitcher threw four balls outside of the strike zone, and the batter didn’t swing at those balls, he would be awarded first base on a “walk.”

At the end of close games, I especially wanted our less-skilled players to keep their bats on their shoulders, try for a walk, and give us a better chance to win. However, if a player struck out swinging with the game on the line, Jean would turn to those of us in the dugout and proclaim, “At least he swung!” To Jean, trying was more important than winning. What a lesson for life!

Second, watch for future signs of God’s sovereignty. Yes, treasure the signs you’ve been given: never forget when heaven came down and filled your soul. Like the shepherds, praise God for what you have seen and heard. But you have a life to live, and, again, much of life consists of routine. The shepherds “returned.” Return to the routine and, of course, watch out for wolves and robbers, so to speak, but also keep your eyes peeled for signs that another world has broken into this world, for signs of the sovereignty of God, for signs that there is a ruler who rules the rulers. Watch not for the birth of the Son of God, for he has already been born; watch for what the Son of God is giving birth to.

Annual retreat

As many of you know, I take an annual personal retreat around the New Year to separate myself from my routine and seek God. As a matter of fact, I leave tomorrow for my twenty-second annual retreat. On many occasions, and in different ways, God has revealed his loving rule to me on these retreats. Sometimes, an insight out of the blue has blown right through me. Other times, something in nature has stopped me dead in my tracks. Still other times, something I stumbled upon in the library of the retreat center has jumped off the page and into my heart. Still other times, something from the Scriptures has cracked open my soul. It's almost as if an angel of the Lord has appeared to me and the glory of the Lord has shone around me.

I treasure these signs of God's loving rule. Some of these experiences I have incorporated into my prayer routine, so they return to me on a regular basis. Also, when I'm fearful, when I'm doubting, when I'm discouraged, I'm able to remember and access what God has shown me about himself on these retreats.

When I return from these personal retreats, invariably I do so in a more watchful way. On the way home, I stop for lunch and order an oyster sandwich, I stop at a stream to see if the salmon are spawning, I stop in San Francisco to process what I experienced, I listen to Michael W. Smith and Bruce Springsteen, soulful singer-songwriters. Sometimes, I serendipitously meet people, and either I encourage them or they encourage me. I'm open. I'm watchful. The challenge for me is to continue being watchful after the glow of the retreat has faded.

Christmas Day is a sign

Finally, especially on Christmas Day, the all-powerful, all-loving rule of God is cause for us to wonder, or marvel, like those who looked upon the Son of God lying in a feeding trough. Christmas Day is an annual sign of God's sovereignty. Once a year, at least, we are reminded that God ruled over the rulers so that his Son could be born in the right way, at the right place, and at the right time. The birth of the Son of God is a sign that one day, earth and heaven will be one.

Indeed, as the prophet Isaiah observes, the birth of the Son of God is wonderful; it is marvelous: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6).

Last Wednesday, I returned to St. Simon Catholic Church, fifty years after having attending Mass there as a child. I came not as a curious child but as a mature follower of the one whose birth we celebrate today, having collected and treasured countless signs of God's sovereignty. I came not as a worshiper per se but as a mourner. I came, with others, to say goodbye to Jean Franceschi, my Little League coach, who died December 13 at the age of eighty-eight. Fifty years ago, in the full of life, he invited me to St. Simon. Fifty years later, in his death, he invited me again. Jean Franceschi, in his life and even in his death, is a sign to me of God's all-powerful, all-loving rule.

Return to your families, to your work, to your life, to your routine, whatever it is, but keep your eyes peeled for signs of the Son of God, who rules the rulers.

Endnotes

- 1 Evans, Craig A. "Mark's Incipit and the Priene Calendar Inscription: From Jewish Gospel to Greco-Roman Gospel," *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 1 (2000,) 69.
- 2 Bailey, Kenneth. *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008). 25-37.