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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Christmas Eve
December 24, 2020

Lectionary Year B: Luke 2:1-20

Though it may seem like ancient history in this 36-month year of 2020, there was indeed a census taken in the United States sometime before Covid hit. I, for one, remember getting my head counted in Indiana for the very first time in my life; among the features of the census questionnaire that stood out for me was an entry for my ethnicity -- not being quite sure what to put (being one-half Swedish, one-quarter Polish, and one-quarter German), I entered "Swedish" because that, in the language of elections, is at least a plurality of who I am. In spirit, though, I would have to say that I'm more Polish and German. It is important to point out, however, that censuses do more than indulge such demographic curiosities of ours; indeed, they help determine boundaries for legislative and congressional districts, federal funding for important projects, and the number of votes per state in the Electoral College, in addition to some of the demographic information already mentioned.

One of the most famous censuses in all of history was the one that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. The census itself would've been for the residents of that region an unwanted reminder that they lived in a land occupied by Romans. As Luke notes, this was during the reign of the Roman emperor Augustus; however, we know that, while Augustus did not rule over "all the world" as the text suggests, he could've just as well have in the Roman imagination. One could say that "all the world that mattered" was to take part in the census. To residents of an occupied land, Luke's account of Jesus' birth happening somewhere that the government required Mary and Joseph to be would've signified hope for a political savior, at least for some. But, of course, the most important aspect of Bethlehem

was its heritage as the city of the great King David, and being "descended from the house and family of David" would have tremendous importance to early Christians of Jewish background.

It is estimated that, given the route they traveled, Mary and Joseph covered about ninety miles on their trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem. And given the speed at which they traveled, the journey would've lasted several days. One can only imagine how exhausted they would've been -- the very pregnant Mary, especially. When they arrived in Bethlehem, it is understandable that there wouldn't have been a lot of space for out-of-town guests given the scope and magnitude of the census being taken; Mary and Joseph surely weren't the only folks looking for a place to stay that evening. What we read in the text as "inn" might be better translated as "guest room"; thus, the sort of modern hotel we envision here wouldn't have existed, and would've instead been a private residence with space for visitors.

(Interestingly, this isn't such a radical concept in the age of Airbnb.) The dwelling that would've housed such a guest room would've been very modest, with living quarters under the same roof as the stable where animals were kept. That's likely how a feeding trough for animals became an improvised crib for the infant Jesus.

Luke doesn't allow us to linger in the stable for very long, though. Rather abruptly, the attention turns to the shepherds who were "keeping watch over their flock by night" (Luke 2:8b). They are, presumably, the first persons outside the Bethlehem stable to witness what has taken place. Of course, they are prompted to do so by an angel who tells them, "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (Luke 2:11). They respond to the angel's directions dutifully and head off to Bethlehem.

Mind you, shepherds in the ancient world were persons of low estate, so right away

we get a glimpse of the people with whom Jesus will associate when he grows up -- not the wealthy and powerful, but the poor and humble. In so many ways, the good news comes to those who probably haven't heard much good news. And the message of the Savior's birth ushers in a new era of upsetting expectations of who the Savior would be. Right along with that upsetting of expectations is who the first people to proclaim the birth of Christ are -- lowly shepherds.

Yes, the shepherds inevitably find themselves proclaiming the birth of Christ. Luke records this as follows: "When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child..." (Luke 2:17). And what did they say? We don't know, exactly, but I think the Church has done a pretty good job filling in the blanks over the centuries. And so we fill the air with shouts of "Jesus Christ is born" and "a Savior has come to us," continuing the work of the shepherds begun some two millennia ago. Nowadays, though, we who proclaim the message come from all walks of life, representing thousands of occupations and ranging from rich to poor and everything in between. Yet our message continues to defy desire and expectation as it announces peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation -- all things that Christ came to Earth to give us. Indeed, Christ saved us from our worst and basest inclinations -- those toward conflict, grudges, division, greed, and selfishness. And he continues to fill our hearts with every good gift to witness to his love. From this place, we are sent forth with his good news to proclaim -- in word and deed -- "Jesus Christ is born" and "a Savior has come to us."

All those centuries ago, however, the word "savior" carried different expectations for some. This led to a considerable amount of difficulty with accepting Jesus as someone who would save the world from sin. Many folks didn't think they needed to be saved from sin and instead looked to Jesus as a political savior -- one who would restore Israel to its previous greatness and drive the occupying Roman government out by force. Finding no such thing in Jesus -- even though he was a de-

scendant of the great King David -- they became confused and frustrated by his message. When we consider how Jesus' life ended, we can't help but see something very dark hanging over the idyllic scene of his birth. The Christmas carol "What Child Is This" brings this imagery together so well in these words: "Nails, spear shall pierce him through, the cross be borne for me, for you; hail, hail the Word made flesh, the babe, the son of Mary!"

And that's exactly the way it is -- defying all expectations of what a savior looks like, acts like...and dies like. Jesus was born and placed in a feeding trough for animals; there was no gilded crib for him. Lowly shepherds became among the first to proclaim his birth. Uneducated fishermen were his first followers. His death was by hanging on a cross between two criminals. But how else would we, as Christians, learn concepts of love, sacrifice, and grace? Surely, it took a life and death like that of Jesus' for God to show us how much he loves us. And tonight, that saga begins with Jesus' birth, and yes, we proclaim it with shouts of "Jesus Christ is born" and "a Savior has come to us."

As we remember, too, what brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem (a census), we look back on this 36-month year of 2020 and consider what brings us here. It has to be -- partly, at least -- out of a need for a glimmer of hope, a ray of light, and a dose of compassion that we can't get anywhere else. I have witnessed how much this place means to you, particularly in your generosity and in your willingness to adapt (sometimes at a moment's notice) to the circumstances brought on by the pandemic. And while our celebration of Christ's birth is a bit muted by the near-absence of sung Christmas carols, the message of this day still rings loud and clear. Count yourselves among the census of Christians proclaiming "Jesus Christ is born" and "a Savior has come to us."

Amen.