

CHRISTMAS EVE ('17)
The Reason for the Season
(Luke 2:1-20)

Heading into the Christmas holiday you have, what I would call, a fascinating set of realities. For instance:

- The world, as a whole, is at peace – sort of, and at least for *most*, though certainly not *all*, of its citizens. But yet there is still a sense of growing unrest and disconnect brewing in almost every corner of it...
- A great world power – currently the greatest, in fact, and by far the wealthiest – is nevertheless plagued by economic and political inequality. In other words, there is undeniable tension between what has often been described or referred to as the “haves” and the “have nots.” You see, there is a wealthy, ruling *minority* (if you will) on the one hand – the one percenters, we might call them – who enjoy great freedom, power, and opportunity, and who lead very comfortable and financially fulfilling lives. But then, in stark contrast, however, there is also the vast *majority*, who live, we might say, “paycheck-to-paycheck,” and who struggle each and every day simply to provide the bare necessities for themselves and for their families, and who are largely disenfranchised in the political arena...
- Inequality then also extends to the sexes as well. It is a male-dominated society, to be sure, where women are taken advantage of at almost every single turn, and have very little say (even over their own lives), and even *less* power; with far fewer options afforded them compared to men...
- There is a brand new system of taxation being implemented, which is proving to be somewhat complicated and disruptive...
- And then there’s the ongoing problems associated with immigration and, in particular, with so-called “anchor” babies born to mothers who hop across the border in order to give birth in, what they feel is, a much better place, full of far more opportunities for their child, both now and in the future...

As I say, it's clearly an interesting time as we head into the Christmas holiday...

Oh... But wait a second... It just suddenly occurs to me that you're probably thinking that I'm talking here about *today*. Right? In other words, about 2017. And that I'm referring to the problems and challenges of our *current* situation...

Well... I guess I can see it. After all, we *do* live in a world marked by growing unrest and tensions between regions and nations, and where we are experiencing noticeably less trust and cooperation than we once seemed to enjoy.

And we *do* live in a period of time where even the greatest power on the world stage – the United States of America – is nevertheless still plagued by tremendous and, some would say, growing inequality – both economically, but also politically; where it seems – sometimes, at least – like the richest among us have both the means and the power to enact legislation that favors their *own* interests over those of their fellow citizens.

Furthermore, we *do* live in a society – unfortunately – where misogyny has once again reared its ugly head as evidenced by the almost daily barrage of revelations concerning harassment and inappropriate behavior towards women that has led to dramatic falls from grace of once-powerful and well-respected men in government, and in the corporate world, and even among well-known journalists and entertainers.

And, here in this country, currently we *are* facing one of the most significant reforms of our tax system in recent memory, perhaps without a clear picture of what will be the ultimate outcome; for both individuals and also for our country as a whole.

And, finally, we *do* hear a lot – both from the news media and also from certain politicians – about the children who have come to be known as “anchor” babies; that is, whose mothers crossed over into the United States – often illegally – just so that their children might be born as U.S. citizens, and, as a result, receive all the so-called rights and privileges thereof...

Yeah, I guess I can *see* how you might draw such a conclusion. I can certainly see how you might think that's what I meant.

But, believe it or not, that's not where I was going with this... at least not at first. You see, when I said at the outset that we are facing a fascinating set of realities headed into the Christmas holiday what I was *actually* referring to was that very *first* Christmas, not the current one! And the circumstances I described for you were the realities experienced in the Roman Empire, specifically Palestine, circa 6 B.C., and not A.D. 2017...

It was the time, you see, of the "Pax Romana" or "Roman Peace" where the empire of Caesar Augustus clearly dominated the then-known world. And, yet, there were cracks and fissures beginning to develop in that world that would result in an ill-fated Jewish rebellion some 70 years later, and the ultimate decline and fall of the entire Roman Empire several centuries after that.

And it was also a time of great, almost crushing, inequality where an elite ruling class carried the emperor's favor and wielded almost unchecked power, amassing huge personal fortunes and enjoying luxurious lifestyles along the way. While, at the very same time, nearly everyone else – many of them slaves – lived literally, and certainly figuratively, a "hand-to-mouth" existence; with no social safety nets for the elderly or the infirm.

And, furthermore, ancient societies were almost always patriarchal, and the Roman world was no exception; especially in small, rural, backwater places like Palestine. Ordinary, peasant women, like Mary the mother of Jesus, had very few opportunities open to them, other than marriage and motherhood, which explains then why Mary's unexpected pregnancy caused such a scandal. In other words, the disgrace of unwed motherhood was enough to destroy a woman's life and future in those days.

And then, at the time of Jesus' birth, as we heard in tonight's gospel reading, there was apparently a brand new and far-reaching system of taxation being implemented that (it appears) included a type of census which required people to return to their ancestral homes in order to be counted for tax *purposes*.

And, finally – and here’s where it gets *really* interesting – there’s the whole issue of anchor babies. In fact, this is really what eventually *inspired* tonight’s sermon. Now we think of this as only a modern-day issue. But, when you stop and think about it, Jesus was perhaps the very *first* anchor baby ever recorded. While it’s certainly true that, at least according to Luke, the enrollment required by the emperor’s new tax is what caused Joseph and a very pregnant Mary to leave their home in Nazareth and travel to Bethlehem, the undeniable *reality* was that this also constituted a move from one political entity or jurisdiction to another, and from a supposedly inferior culture in the north to, what was considered to be, the far superior culture of the south and its capital city of Jerusalem.

In other words, I wonder how the residents of Bethlehem – located a mere five and a half miles *from* Jerusalem, the traditional capital of Israel then and, for some, even now – might have felt about this young, very pregnant woman arriving and then immediately giving birth to a son in an already over-crowded village that maybe didn’t have enough opportunities for its *own* children to pursue. Would they have looked at Joseph and Mary and the baby Jesus with a degree of suspicion, and hostility, and maybe even a little bit of resentment for potentially taking away what, they believed, rightfully belonged to their own?

I can even picture signs proclaiming “Judea for Judeans!” or “Bethlehem for Bethlehemites!” Or “Galileans go home!”

Culturally speaking, Judeans apparently despised their cousins to the north as lacking sophistication. Moreover, it is said that Galileans even spoke a distinctive form of Aramaic with an accent that would have made them seem as much of a foreigner, as someone once pointed out, as an Irishman in London or a Texan in New York.

And maybe that even explains why Joseph and Mary were not welcomed with open arms when they arrived in Bethlehem, why they could not find anywhere to stay, why there was no place for them in the inn, and why they finally had to settle

for a stable, and why the newborn Jesus was laid in a manger – in other words, a feeding trough.

Joseph and Mary, you see, were immigrants in a foreign land. But – and this is key – in order for Jesus to be the promised savior he *had* to be born in another country, and specifically in that small village, in order to fulfill the prophecy of Micah 5:2: “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days.”

Jesus, then, truly *is* the original anchor baby, born in Bethlehem in order to claim all the rights and privileges of being the son of David. In other words, his parents had to travel to give him the necessary *birth right* for being the Messiah as was predicted in the Old Testament...

It kind of turns the whole Christmas story upside down, doesn't it? When we view the Christ-child in this way, as an anchor baby, an immigrant child born in a foreign land. When we are reminded, once again, how God acts in ways so contrary to our own. In fact, through this lens, we see the wisdom and power of God in an entirely new and different light.

By *our* way of thinking, of course, Jesus should have been born in Rome, not Palestine. He should have been born into wealth, not poverty. His mother should have been a woman of nobility and standing, not some poor peasant girl. And a teenager, no less!

Moreover, Jesus should have been born to someone who *benefitted* from taxation, not some commoner who had to travel to a foreign land in order to be counted for tax purposes. And, finally, Jesus should never, *ever*, have been a so-called anchor baby, whose mother traveled – despite her advanced pregnancy, mind you! – in order for him to claim his true birth right.

It just doesn't make any sense. That God would do the unexpected, and turn our world upside down and inside out...

However, the more time you spend with the biblical story, the more time you spend recalling how God acts and the priorities that God sets, you begin to realize that this all makes *perfect* sense. Because God inevitably and invariably chooses to act in ways that are so contrary – diametrically opposed even! – to our own.

The reason *why* Jesus was born, and born in the manner in which he was, is that we live in a crazy, mixed up world that *needed* to be turned upside down and inside out, quite frankly! The reason for the season – the *Christmas* season – is that all was not right with our world or with ourselves, and God needed to intervene on our behalf. For only a savior could fix our mess; a savior who is Christ the Lord.

The Apostle Paul got it exactly right when he observed, that God typically chooses what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chooses what is weak in the world to shame the strong, and God chooses what is low and despised in the world – in other words, things that are considered to be of absolutely *no* importance – in order to reduce to nothing the things that *are* considered important.

The utter foolishness of the Christ-child being, for all intents and purposes, an anchor baby? It makes absolutely no sense! The reality of the almighty God coming to us as a weak and vulnerable newborn? Who could have predicted it! That even the first ones to come and worship him were a ragtag band of mangy shepherds? Inconceivable!

It totally and forever destroys our human concepts of strength and power. And the sheer audacity of choosing a young peasant girl – a virtual nobody – who then gives birth to this anchor baby in order to set in motion God’s gracious plan of salvation, defies all logic... again *human* logic, that is. But then... God’s ways are not our own...

That holy night, while shepherds were keeping watch over their flock, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

Not just a little bit of joy, but *great* joy said the angel. And what exactly was it that made this joy so great? In the final analysis, and biblically speaking, true greatness is never to be found in our human quest for wisdom, power, or importance. But, instead, in the humble birth of the Christ-child, born in a stable, laid in a manger; the one who, years later, would explain it like this: "...whoever *wishes* to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever *wishes* to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to *be* served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Come to think of it, the world today and the world of Jesus' day are really not all that different from each other. In the end, we are plagued by the very same problems and challenges; the very same mistakes and shortcomings.

So maybe that's why we're here tonight. Maybe we somehow sense – at least I hope we do – that we need to hear and experience the Christmas story all over again in terms of our *own* day and time. Because the basic conditions and circumstances haven't really changed all that much, they're pretty much the same. We still live in a crazy mixed up world that needs to be turned upside down and inside down. We still need to be reminded that Jesus was born not as one of the "haves" but as one of the "have nots" in order to show that God cares for *all* his people, not just the powerful and mighty among us. That God, in fact, has a special place in his heart for the least and most vulnerable of his children. And so it was exactly into such humble circumstances that God *purposely* chose to send his Son. Why? To show us the way; God's way. And to, thereby, utterly transform and redeem the world!

Amen.