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December 2, 2007

Caesar is Lord
The Real Story of Christmas-Week 1
First Sunday in Advent

Jesus was born at a particular time and in a particular place. We often forget that. If you look at the many images around his birth, you could think he was born in a New England winter rather than the Middle East. But that is OK. We will each take Jesus and his birth and translate it into our context; there is nothing wrong with that—that is, until we pull so far from Jesus and his times that the story loses its meaning. It becomes outside history, outside time and place.

Over these next weeks, we are going to reclaim the history of the Christmas story. We are going to look at the many elements in the Christmas story that fly right past us because we don't know the times, the circumstances, or where the story is set. We are going to do this because *context is everything*—and if you and I don't have a context for this story, we won't understand its meaning and we will not grasp the meaning of the season.

I want to reclaim the history because what we have turned Christmas into doesn't really work for me. Maybe it doesn't work for you either. Maybe you dread this time of year, with the shopping, cleaning, cooking and wrapping. If so, these weeks may help you reclaim the meaning of the story. And for those of you who love this time of the year, this next month will give you a new depth and richness to the story.

The story of Christmas, as found in Matthew's and Luke's gospels, points to a larger story than we usually see. This story is set not in a New England winter, but in the shadow of Rome, and that, my friends, will make *all* the difference.

I am excited to share what we are going the *Real Christmas Story* with you because it has transformed how I hear these scriptures and experience the season for myself personally. What I will be sharing with you is not new or original—you will be able to find all the history I share with you in the local library or on the Internet. In fact, on my blog I will list some resources for further reading and study. And I am thinking many of you will want to look into that, because we are going to learn some really amazing things.

So let's begin at the start of the Luke's gospel with these words, Luke 2:1-5:

2In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

This is probably familiar to you. It is part of the traditional story, but look at how it begins...*in those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus...* As we look at the

power of the story, we must begin here. We hear this totally differently than the ancients would have. They knew who Augustus was; most of us have no idea.

Think of it this way. It would be like if I said, *our new president was born in a log cabin*. You would think, *log cabin, ahh, like Lincoln*.

Or maybe more realistically, suppose I said, *My friend went into politics right after Nixon left office*. Well, you probably know Nixon resigned before he could be impeached, so if someone went into politics at that time, there is a good chance it was in some way a response to what was going on culturally. And if Nixon hadn't been part of what drew them into politics, then I doubt they would have even mentioned it.

So, *in those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus...* What were those days? That is, what was life like when Jesus was born, and who was Emperor Augustus? Let's first look at the times.

As we have mentioned during our series on Jesus' teachings, this was a time of great disparity. There were the rich and the poor and a deep gulf between them. Much of the poverty of the time had to do with the taxation system that, for the Jews, was very heavy. They were taxed by the Romans, who controlled the land, and then also had a tax that was a religious obligation (in other words, it wasn't voluntary). Their religious giving supported the priests, the temple and staff, and the poor. And in case you are wondering, their giving to the Temple added up to slightly over 20% of their income per year.

The two taxes together could take as much as 35-40% of peasant salaries, and this could push someone from the working poor to the begging poor. Farmers who could not pay their Roman tax could lose their land, which created a growing number of landless day-laborers, widespread emigration, and a social class of robbers and beggars.¹

Watch this clip from "The Nativity Story". It will give you a flavor of the terror taxes brought on the people.

Clip: (I will figure out the time on this...)

So you have this poverty, and with it a sense of unrest—not only poverty, but also the Jews' subjugation by Rome.

Let's step back and look at even a wider picture: Emperor Caesar Augustus. The man we know as Caesar Augustus was born in Rome in 63 B.C. His grandmother, Julia, was the sister of Julius Caesar. His given name was Octavian, but upon his becoming emperor in 27BCE, he was renamed Augustus, which means, exalted and respected one (this is also where we get the month August, and Augustus died on August 19—my birthday!).

After Caesar's assassination on the *Ides of March*, 44 BCE, Augustus, who was 18 years old, became Caesar's adopted son. The implications of this are that he inherited his great-uncle's money and power.

Historian Karl Galinsky says,

Then something very fortuitous happens: Halley's Comet shows up and the word is given out by Augustus that this is the soul of Julius Caesar ascending into

¹ Marcus Borg, "Jesus: A New Vision" page 85

heaven. So from this point on he is called Julius Caesar the divine. Politically it became very potent, because what does Augustus do at this point? On all his coinage on all his writings, on all his symbols, whatever, he puts on the words "DF", meaning Son of the Divine. And it's really quite an asset in politics to be the Son of the Divine. There are modern politicians I think would be very jealous of being able to do that. (From PBS Rome, episode 1)

Augustus' first order of business was to avenge the murder of his "father", as well as to exercise total control over Rome. The culmination of this was a battle (the Battle of Actium, 31 BCE), at which his forces defeated those of Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, really, Marc Antony & Cleopatra.

Augustus brought peace after 100 years of war. Among other things, he developed a sound currency system, extended the highway system, built bridges and aqueducts, and developed an efficient postal service (so now you know whom to thank!). Literature flourished with Virgil, Horace, and Ovid as well.

In the book, *The Atheism of the Early Church* author Rushdoony, writes,

When Augustus Caesar took the helm in Rome and had consolidated his power, a great celebration was held throughout the Roman Empire. It was called the 'Advent' celebration -- a very significant term, and a very religious one. It was the Advent celebration because Augustus Caesar had *come*, in the fullness of his power. The heralds -- again an interesting word -- were sent to the far corners of the Roman Empire with a great Advent proclamation: 'There is none other name under heaven whereby men may be saved than the name of Augustus Caesar!' It was the proclamation of Caesar, of the state, as man's savior (p. 7).

Virgil reports, "It was the faith of his people and the confession of all peoples: *Augustus is the world's savior who was to come.*"

Ethelbert Stauffer, an expert on first century coins (which were the communications media of the times), describes one coin as proclaiming Caesar Augustus, *Son of Eternal (or Divine) Caesar, incarnate Zeus*, "worthy of honor", and the "Son of God". In Stauffer's book, these coins were issued to celebrate the occasion while holy incense was distributed to the people to be used for purification from sin as well.

"The symbolic meaning is clear," said Stauffer. "A new day is dawning in the world. The divine Savior-King, born in the historic hour ordained by the stars, has come to power on land and sea, and inaugurates the cosmic era of salvation. Salvation is to be found in none other than Augustus, and there is no other name given to man in which they can be saved. This is the climax of the Advent proclamation of the Roman empire." (*Christ and Caesar*)

And, while we are there, go ahead and add to the list that Augustus was regularly proclaimed as the *coming king* who brought peace to the earth.

Richard Horsley discusses the reason for this: "Octavian put an end to more than a decade of exhausting empire-wide civil war between rival warlords. Octavian, having taken the honorific new name Augustus, was acclaimed as the Savior of the world, who had established *peace and prosperity*, fulfilling the hopes and longings of all humankind." The gospel, or "good news" of his "advent of peace" as the Son of God,

was being proclaimed throughout the Roman Empire. Much of this propaganda has been preserved for us to this day on government coins.

Let me summarize this: the Emperor of the time, Caesar Augustus, was worshiped as both God and the son of God, was called Savior and Lord, and was the one who brought peace on earth and goodwill toward all. Do you hear the parallel? Can you begin to imagine that these same titles—when used later to speak of Jesus—were a complete affront to the political system of the times? Can you begin to sense how dangerous the Christmas story originally was?

This *Pax Romano*, the Roman peace, came at a cost, especially for the common people. This clip is from PBS series on Ancient Rome, and it speaks about the entertainment of the time.

Clip: <http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/vid/entertainment.html>

It is into the time of emperor worship, violence, and poverty that the story of Jesus' birth is set. You see, the Jews—the people from whom Jesus comes—stood at odds with much of what was happening. They believed that this was not how the world should be.

Of major concern to them was the worship of other gods—this was an abomination to them. As Jewish historian Josephus has said of the Jews' view, "one temple, for the one God."

An important piece to know is that the Jews were unique among the people of the time; they believed that they had been chosen by the One God to play a unique role in history. They believed that through them people would come to know and serve the true God.

As the Jews stand looking out over the world in which our story opens, one can almost hear these words prayed—or maybe pleaded—from the Psalms into this time:

¹To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. ²O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me. ³Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous. ⁴Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. ⁵Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long. ⁶Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. ⁷Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD! ⁸Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. ⁹He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. ¹⁰All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees. (Psalm 25:1-10)

The Jews wait for a change in the person of the Messiah. There are many understandings of what they are waiting for, but these words traditionally used this Sunday in Advent, speak well to the hope of the times:

64 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—²as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!³ When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.⁴ From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.⁵ You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.⁶ We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.⁷ There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.⁸ Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.⁹ Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people. (Isaiah 64:1-9)

In a couple of minutes, we will sing *O little Town of Bethlehem*. It was written by Phillip Brooks, who was a preacher in Boston in the late 1800s. Brooks was a prophet to a generation torn by the bloody Civil War and its seemingly endless aftermath. He wrote a carol to express his hopes for his broken world, centered in the little town of Bethlehem.

*O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.
Yet .in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

This week we begin Advent, a season for preparation for Christmas. And this season begins in darkness, and with waiting. It begins with prophecies of old and a yearning.

Today, we pick up the first thread of this story and see that it is about religion, but it is also about politics, power and the fullness of time. For today, as we begin the story, we stand at the crux of history in the midst of two worlds. One is a world where the powerful Caesar Augustus is Lord. In the other, a child born to a marginalized couple at the corner of the empire is Lord—Jesus is Lord.

Who is in charge — *the powers that be* or our God? Who or what is this season really about? May you discover, as you discover the history of the story, the power of it. And may the real story of Christmas keep you focused on Jesus.