

The Birth of Jesus

2 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. **2** This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. **3** All went to their own towns to be registered. **4** Joseph 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. **5** He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. **6** While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. **7** And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.[a]

The Shepherds and the Angels

8 Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. **9** Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. **10** 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: **11** to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah,[b] the Lord. **12** This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” **13** And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host,[c] praising God and saying,

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“Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favours!”[d]

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” **16** So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger.

17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about

this child, **18** and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, **19** and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. **20** The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

SERMON

Who cares who was governor? Bring on the shepherds, cue the angel choir and let's visit Mary, Joseph and the Baby Jesus!

Luke cares who was governor, who was emperor and who was being squeezed for tax money to fund the army that had conquered them in the first place. And there is plenty here for us to care about too. The wonder and scandal of Jesus, the Word made Flesh hits us broadside once we know the particular sort of world Jesus is born into and the sort of flesh and family history Jesus is born into.

Let me borrow from one of the best preachers I've ever seen—the Rev. Dr. Anna Carter Florence. She writes about the particular world Jesus is born into in her book “A is for Alabaster”...an alphabetical treatment of persons in the Bible. Here are excerpts from her entry about Quirinius:

“Quirinius was governor. Augustus was emperor. Herod was King. There was a new tax code. In short, life was hell: a perfect storm of misery”.

“Those who first read Luke’s gospel probably didn’t need any introductions to Quirinius, Augustus, and Herod any more than we need introductions to Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini. We cannot ignore the particularities of our own political contexts—how Quirinius is among us now and what that means for the most vulnerable and poor.

“Incarnation is always perilous. Evil is always a factor....Yet Luke’s readers would know something else, too, and so should we. Not even Quirinius can halt the purposes of God. The powers and principalities of this earth may be at work, but they will never defeat the Prince of Peace.

Anna Carter Florence *A is for Alabaster*

We might want Jesus to send Quirinius, Herod and Augustus packing. Instead, angels go looking for shepherds. Shepherds in turn wander into town looking for a baby whose basinet is a feed box for the livestock. That particularity tells us something too. The teacher, therapist and writer Henri Nouwen writes in his journal from his travels in Latin America about why God would choose to be enfleshed into a world that was rapidly becoming a dumpster fire:

God came to us because he wanted to join us on the road, to listen to our story, and to help us realize that we are not walking in circles but moving towards the house of peace and joy. This is the great mystery of Christmas that continues to give us comfort and consolation: we are not alone on our journey... Christmas is the renewed invitation not to be afraid and let him -- whose love is greater than our own hearts and minds can comprehend -- be our companion.

*- from Gracias! A Latin American Journal by Henri Nouwen,
excerpted in Advent and Christmas Wisdom from Henri J.M. Nouwen*

And tonight, we light candles. As we do, I offer the words of preacher and poet

***"I will light candles this Christmas.
Candles of joy, despite all the sadness.
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch.
Candles of courage where fear is ever present.
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days.
Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens.
Candles of love to inspire all of my living.
Candles that will burn all the year long. "*** Howard Thurman