

Christmas Eve, Gospel, Year B

A SAVIOR IS BORN FOR US

Luke 2:1-14

Christmas Eve

Analysis by Timothy J. Hoyer

In 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.6While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7And 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 for them in the inn.

8In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.10But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

DIAGNOSIS: We Have Orders, Retribution, and Death

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Decrees and Orders Abound

All people were ordered to perform a task whether they were able to do it or not, whether they could afford to or not. It was an order. They had to do it. If they did not do it, they would be penalized. That is how the world was functioning on the eve of the first Christmas.

Tracking: For our present Christmas an order has been given. In the United States, the order is to go buy things—buy more clothes, more toys, more tools, more useless items, more computers or computerized gadgets. Organizations ask for end of the year donations. Even the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America sends a catalog to every congregation entitled “Good Gifts Catalog.” Commercials on TV keep making the order, “Buy gifts, buy gifts, buy gifts.” One commercial has the theme, “Giving is receiving,” implying that it’s okay to buy presents for yourself, too, or only yourself. Wherever Christmas is celebrated around the world, there are traditions that say, “This is the correct way to celebrate Christmas.” Whether we can afford to or not, whether we are able to or not, we are given orders for how to celebrate Christmas.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): The Amount of Our Obedience to the Orders Determines How Good We Are

People obeyed the order—the decree—that went out from Emperor Augustus. They obeyed because the order was retributive, that is, if you disobeyed you got punished; if you obeyed, you got called obedient and a good citizen. Every action in life is a subject of retribution, just as people were subjects of Emperor Augustus. People live trusting the system of retribution, always desiring to be called good, because they had done the right thing.

Tracking: People obey the demands to buy more stuff. People obey

the customs of baking and cooking and family gatherings. And just after all the presents are opened, before the relief that comes when people realize that everything is done. Someone says, "This was the best Christmas ever!" There is the unspoken demand, a demand that comes from competition, that each Christmas has to be better than the last Christmas—bigger, with more food, more people, and more stuff. And retribution speaks its judgment, "Because Christmas was better than last year, you are a good person." People trust the verdict of retribution. They think, "I have done what I was supposed to. No one can yell at me. I have performed well. I should be called a good person."

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): God's Determination of Our Obedience Is Death

In the obedience to the decree and in the trust of retribution to judge those who obey as good, there is no recognition of God who created all things, seen and unseen. There is no love, fear, and trust in God above anything else. People go through their daily lives, obeying decrees from many sources, without much, if any, reference to God in all they do and fear and trust and love. For their lack of trust in God, they do not get God's protection. Rather, they get God's verdict for their disobedience. They get God's retribution: death.

Tracking: In the obedience to the orders to buy stuff, and to trust retribution to judge those who buy lots of stuff as good, there is no recognition of God. There is no love, fear, and trust in God. Fear is in not having enough money to have a good Christmas. Love is in buying and receiving more things. Trust is in doing what one is supposed to. People go through each day trying to get by, trying to get enough to eat, trying to keep their job if they have one. There is no thought of God as work is done and a visit is made to the local food cupboard. God's verdict of death is always present, maybe unnoticed because of how slowly the verdict is carried out.

PROGNOSIS: We Are Given God's Favor and Peace by a Savior

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): God Is Determined to Give Us Peace

There were shepherds who seem to be unaffected by the Emperor's decree; their hometown was Bethlehem and they had already registered, and so could go back to obeying the orders of their employer to watch his sheep. Unknown to them, of course, and to everyone else, was that a woman had given birth to her firstborn child, had wrapped him in bands of cloth, and had laid him in a manger. If a few had seen that birth and knew of it, it looked like the birth of any child. But God was doing something and God wanted it known what God was doing. God had to tell or what God did would not be known. So God sent an angel, a messenger, to announce what was happening. The angel had the glory of God around him and so caused the shepherds to be afraid, greatly afraid. The shepherds feared God's retribution. But the angel had good news. He did not have a decree or an order or a demand. He had good news, a gift. He announced a savior from death and retribution had been born. The proof, the sign of this gift, was a baby wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. Then innumerable angels filled the sky and sang that God's favor was given to all people so they could have peace with God. That peace means to be in God's favor, and no longer a subject of retribution, not even God's.

Tracking: That announcement of a Savior is the same for us today.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (External Solution): Our Hearts Trust God's Gift of Peace

The shepherds trusted the good news the angels gave them. They went and saw God, their savior from death and retribution. They made known what had been told them so that others could also know God's gift and have peace with God.

Tracking: We also get to trust the good news the angels tell us. We too are given a Savior from retribution and death. We too are given peace with God.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): We Get to Live and Give the Savior's Peace to Others

Tracking: We too get to tell others what we have seen and heard. We get to give people around us peace with God. And we get to live in the Savior's new way of life free from death and retribution. We can offer peace to others by words of love and kindness and support and declaring them to be good, to be good people, all because the savior says so. All during the day, as people fret about how they are judged, how they know they are evaluated at work, how their cooking will be pronounced good or inedible, we can tell them, because the Savior is born, "The peace of the Savior be with you."