

Christmas Eve, Year B

The Camel Outside Our Palace

Luke 2:1-20

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Analysis by Matt Metevelis

In those days a decree went out from Emperor 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 for them in the inn.

⁸ In that 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 Savior, who is the Messiah, 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, praising God and saying,

*¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

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 But 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, as it had been told them.



Author's Note: The birth of Jesus Christ as a savior for all humanity is an event that is sheer gospel in itself. How does one out preach the heavenly host of angels shouting glory "in excelsis Deo"? But there is another voice too. We miss it. It's right in the beginning. The voice belongs to the most powerful

man in the world at that time. Caesar Augustus sends a decree for all the world to be registered.

We might be tempted to think that Luke shares this detail to prove his chops as a historian. We might skip these obscure Roman names as devices to tell time. (Or we might think that the Holy Spirit might want to make our reader work a bit in pronouncing “Quirinius”). The voice of Augustus Caesar is integral to the story. Law and Gospel are present in this story as two distinct words. Law comes down from the mouth of empire seeking to “register” the people to make plans for the drafting of soldiers and the levying of taxes. Gospel rises up from the mouths of landless shepherds bearing the promises of God. Augustus sends the law as a centripetal word seeking to count, control, and claim resources for his empire. The good news becomes a centrifugal rejoicing as landless shepherds take the promises of Christ to more and more people. They proclaim a true peace that Rome cannot deliver.

Luke’s Christmas text takes place between Caesar and Christ. Caesar’s “top down” census mirrors the law in its demand to conform. The gospel of Christ confronts it by delivering a savior from the “bottom up.” A savior wearing swaddling clothes for robes gives us the peace that Caesar can’t. I undertake this study from a traditional law/gospel distinction that understands that we are the captives of the former until we are captivated by the latter.

DIAGNOSIS: A Camel on the Roof

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): 2020

This has been the strangest year many of us have experienced. A disease has killed hundreds of thousands here and millions across the world. The economy has collapsed. The effects have touched almost every area of our public and private lives.

Churches have been closed too. Many will preach this year via the internet.

We've lost our sense of normalcy and routine. Simple comforts like holidays with family or a trip to buy pants at the mall might be dangerous. Toilet paper almost became a luxury item. Fear seeps into our social and political lives. Americans are confronting past sins and present injustice in the wake of extrajudicial killings of African Americans by police. Record turnout in a presidential election seemed motivated more by people's fears about the other candidate than any real hope for the future.

For the odium applied to Rome, especially by the inhabitants of Palestine with long memories for ancient Israel, the empire provided one thing. Peace. The stability of roads, safe trading routes, currency, contracts, and inland provinces and territories free from raids and invasion made good lives for people. In our current situation the "empires" and institutions of our lives seem to be breaking down. 2020 has accelerated many of those trends by disrupting a service-oriented economy and sending into quarantine a developed world in the face of a loneliness epidemic. As Yates would say the center is not holding.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Sorry, I Don't Have It in Me

"Madness, as you know, is like gravity. All it takes is a little push!" So said Heath Ledger's Joker to Batman in The Dark Knight. The "little push" has been felt by many this year. We are creatures of habit who count on our routines. Empty grocery store shelves, shuttered businesses, endless zoom meetings, kids isolated at home at some point have taken a toll. The experts call it "Covid Fatigue." To make it worse, temptations arise to

“make the most” of the situation. Shakespeare wrote King Lear during a plague, don’t you know? 2020 has been filled with “little pushes” from so many directions.

We find our value in things that can be registered. Our jobs, our bank accounts, our hobbies, our homes, our family gatherings, our vacations. The freedom to pursue these things comes because we are relatively free from the necessities and threats of nature. A pandemic has peeled many of these conveniences back and forced us to grapple with the wreckage of all our myths about self-sufficiency. We are tempted in times like these to take account of the things in our little empires. Our census is both external and internal. Whether we’ve stocked up on canned goods or clamored about our righteousness in wearing a mask (or not wearing one), crisis pushes us to prove to ourselves that we can count on ourselves. The pandemic has made us census takers to push back the threat of madness.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): A Camel on the Roof

There is a story in the Sufi tradition that I just love. A great prince lived in an enormous palace. The prince was a very devout man. He would often go out into his courtyard to pray. One evening while praying he saw a great sage walking on his roof. “What are you doing?” the prince shouted up to the sage. “I am searching for my lost camel!” replied the sage. Baffled the prince asked, “Isn’t it silly to look for a camel on the roof?” The sage only called back, “About as silly as seeking God inside a palace.”

God is too often the name we give to whatever can give us security and comfort. We truly worship whatever we fear, love, or trust as Luther’s catechisms have it. “God” is the name we give to whatever serves and protects our little empires. The safety of our palaces become a place to hide and push our fear

out. The problem is that behind those walls faith rarely makes its way in.

As David discovered to his chagrin taking a census is an act of unfaith (2 Samuel 24). God wants to be glorified in the things divinely given to us, not applauded for the things we claim for ourselves. Whether in our net- worth or in our self-worth our quest to find God through our own resources is just a mad scramble up the roof to find our camel. And God knows it.

PROGNOSIS: The Camel Outside Our Palace



Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): God Lives Outside

The first seven verses in this text are a narrative of descent. A decree goes from the emperor to the provinces. Joseph goes down from Galilee to Bethlehem. Mary wraps Jesus up and puts him down in a manger. While we are busy looking for our camel on the roof, God descends to give us God's very own son. Even though Joseph himself is under the emperor's decree his son, Jesus is born outside with animals because there was no room for Jesus in

the places where Caesar is counting. God usually shows up in places outside of our ledger. The one who will bring real peace lives outside Caesar's grasp.

The revelation to the shepherds drives this point home. The Greek word usually translated "living in the fields" means something more like "living outside." The shepherds lived outside the world of Caesar's census taking too. Vital to this story is that the shepherds are not actively looking for anything in the beginning. The good news intrudes upon them in flashes of light and words from heaven. They share what they have found but only after what they have heard and seen. Christ does not come to them due to frantic searching or pious grasping. The good news finds them. The Greek only uses one word to convey this "εὐαγγελίζω" "I am gospeling you," proclaims the angel. The gospelers are not on the roof. They are not in the palace. The camel has found them.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): To You

While we grasp like Caesar for control over our domains, Christ comes to usher in a kingdom right under our noses. The angel proclaimed this directly to the shepherds. "To you is born this day a Savior" This is gospel at once at its most bare and most glorious. Jesus is born on this day. The Savior is here in the present. And the savior is not here as a bare fact. The Savior has come "to you." Jesus is not just another head that gets counted in the census. And unlike Caesar the Messiah does not seek to take from us. Christ gives. The angels can't help but break out into song over these gifts—peace, salvation, God's favor.

Many congregations are full of shepherds huddling outside this Christmas. Some will be keeping their sheep by pinching pennies because unemployment benefits will expire after the holiday.

Others will be mourning from the losses, fatigues, and disappointments of this difficult year. A few might be still smarting because their particular image of Caesar has been denied a throne (or won't leave one). Many will literally be outside the palaces of the sanctuaries and narthexes where they have been accustomed to find God watching screens with the same weary boredom that shepherds watched the stars. Proclaim as the angels did that for all of them in all their fears, frustrations, and anxieties they have a savior. Forced out of the palaces of comfort and routine we meet a camel equipped to carry us into the uncertainties before us. No matter how many "pushes" come our way both big and little we rest on the one who will not be moved. Our furious seeking ends in the God who finds us.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Make it Known

Long used to hearing this story we often gloss over the utter absurdity of it. The angels speak of a "messiah" in the city of David. Their speech conjures images of conquests and dynastic glory. But the "sign" they give is the most mundane sign there is. The image of this royal savior child laying in an animal trough wrapped in bands of cloth. The full power of God is in the lowest things that the world neglects.

People with faith cause the world to look at these neglected things through their testimony. Filled with the glory of God the shepherds seek to make it known. The world around us roils with strife and panic over case counts and positivity rates. But as the big picture around us looks grim the small gifts around us look brighter in relief. Proclaiming Christ in this moment means that Christ's blessings will be all around us hidden in small acts and small moments. A priest stricken with COVID in Italy declines a ventilator to give someone else a chance. A nurse returns to work after his own illness to treat more people.

Communities get together to assemble food. Neighbors look in on one another. These are the small things that manifest a great God. These are the bands of cloth that wrap up our tiny Messiah. As we hold onto them we are cradling Christ.

When we are filled with faith we make these things known. We talk about them with anyone who can hear. We are no longer seekers. We become tellers. The census of Caesar here fades before the proclamation of the Messiah. The shepherds tell the world as Mary ponders it in her heart. This nascent promise is the seed that through faith will one day grow and swallow the world's fear. After the palace walls crumble the camel shows up and keeps coming.