

Christmas Eve A
December 24, 2019
Luke 2:1-20

UNLOCKING THE KEY OF NATIVITY

God of mystery and grace, in the face of this Child we behold your face, and in the light of his presence we see our world anew. Open our eyes, enlarge our minds, deepen our faith that you are here with us and for us in the Babe of Bethlehem. Amen.

My 6th grade daughter came to me for help on a school project last week. The topic was the ROSETTA STONE; and more specifically, whether the stone should stay in the British Museum—where it's been for 200 years—OR be repatriated to Egypt, from where it originates.

The Rosetta Stone, you may recall, is famous for the way it opened a door to ancient Egyptian culture that had been closed for two thousand years.

When French soldiers discovered it by accident in 1799 while digging a foundation for a fort along the Nile, they suspected it was too valuable to simply be used as fodder for their wall—and they were right.

For this particular stone was no ordinary cast-off of history. Its polished surface was covered with words and symbols written in three ancient tongues, one of which was ancient Greek.¹

Using the Greek text as a key and comparing it with the stone's other scripts enabled linguists to decipher the ancient hieroglyphic symbols, and unlock a language and history that had sealed shut for two millennia.²

When the British defeated Napoleon's army on Egyptian soil, the Stone ended up in British hands, where it's been ever since.

Over time, "ROSETTA STONE" has become a synonym for any interpretive key that enables previously unknowable mysteries to become known.

Tonight, as we bend our ears to the story of Jesus' birth, we'll be asking whether St. Luke has left any interpretive key for us to discover, anything that will help us better comprehend what, at core, this good news is really about.

As the story opens, Luke describes two competing narratives that vie for our attention and, ultimately, our allegiance. He begins with the opening line...

IN THOSE DAYS A DECREE WENT OUT FROM EMPEROR AUGUSTUS THAT ALL THE WORLD SHOULD BE REGISTERED.

This is the first narrative—originating in ROME—of decrees set in motion from the top—down; of orders that push Rome's subject peoples around like pawns on a chessboard so they can be registered, counted, and—ultimately—controlled.

While scholars dispute whether Luke had all his facts straight about this census, there is no disputing the fact that Caesar had a penchant for getting accurate nose counts of the peoples who lived under his thumb.

¹ The two others, were Egyptian Hieroglyphic, and Demotic Egyptian.

² For more on the Rosetta Stone, visit: <https://blog.britishmuseum.org/everything-you-ever-wanted-to-know-about-the-rosetta-stone/>

He knew the value of enumerating the Empire's citizens and non-citizens—for military conscription AND for leveraging taxes³—two things empires need to survive.

COUNTING PEOPLE COUNTS, which is why in 2020, as the once-a-decade U.S. Census rolls out, so many states, counties, institutions, agencies, and organizations will be advocating for as complete a count as possible.

In a world where money and power follow the numbers, numbers matter.

But Rome's narrative is not the only narrative operative in our story tonight. There is a second narrative—a counter narrative—afoot in this story.

This counter narrative pays no attention to the shakers and movers and power brokers at the top, but focuses instead on the nearly invisible ones who've been driven to the margins—but who on this night take their place at center stage. Luke goes on:

Joseph also went from Nazareth to the city of David called Bethlehem to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. And while they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger...

After framing the story of Christ's birth by referencing the powers-that-be and their agendas for the world, Luke shifts our attention to Joseph and Mary, and ignores those powers completely.

And this, I think, is the Rosetta Stone which unlocks for us the essence of what this story is about. It's as if Luke is telling us:

YES, THIS OTHER WORLD WITH ITS BIG NAMES, FANCY TITLES, IMPEACHMENT PROCEEDINGS, AND POWER AGENDAS EXISTS; BUT THAT IS NOT WHERE GOD IS FOUND THIS NIGHT.... LET ME SHOW YOU WHAT I MEAN...

Luke references the OFFICIAL VERSION of history, and then takes us on the underground tour to show us the **SUB-VERSION**.

The official version reads: CENSUS STRENGTHENS EMPIRE
But the sub-version declares: EMPIRE ABOUT TO BE TURNED UPSIDE DOWN.

The official version reads: CAESAR SAVES WORLD—ESTABLISHES PEACE.
But the sub-version declares: THIS INFANT IN A CATTLE STALL IS OUR WONDERFUL COUNSELOR, MIGHTY GOD, EVERLASTING FATHER, PRINCE OF PEACE.

The official version reads: GOOD NEWS FOR ROME
But the sub-version declares: THIS GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY IS FOR ALL PEOPLE.

At every turn Luke shows us how God is at work in Bethlehem deconstructing a world built on power and privilege and reconstructing in its place a world built on mercy and compassion.

³ Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*. (New York: Doubleday, 1977), p. 549

A world whose core mystery will only finally be deciphered when we watch this Child—fully grown—stretch out his arms to embrace all our brokenness—and even death itself—on the cross.

“Go to the crib and see how small he became,” wrote Mother Teresa, “and how he lived that total surrender to the full.”

This new vision, which takes on flesh and bone and blood in Bethlehem, turns the hierarchy of every power mongering empire on its head.

In Bethlehem, in that stable, the question WHERE CAN GOD BE FOUND? has a new answer: God is where we are weak, vulnerable, small, and dependent, just like that small infant.⁴

What is God trying to tell us here?

- In a world where conflicts rage and missiles threaten;
- In a world steeped in white supremacy and toxic fundamentalism;
- In a world where political machinations dominate the news cycle;
- In a world filled with grief, tragedy and brokenness...

God chooses to come into our midst as Emmanuel—God with us.

So, my friends, if you’ve ever felt invisible to God—FEAR NOT!

If you’ve ever wondered whether anyone would bother to know your story, to see your striving, to sense your longing, your joy; your anger or grief— FEAR NOT!

If you ever thought that God was too remote, silent, untouchable, unreachable—FEAR NOT!

This vulnerable bundle, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, is become our lens for knowing God, and he comes tonight to share one simple, profound message:

YOU COUNT—EVERY ONE OF YOU COUNT!

You count for me, God says, not for what you might be able to do for me, not for what I can get from you, not because numbers count, not even because you trust me—if you trust me.

You count simply because I love you – and there’s nothing I want more than to make this love real in your life.

THIS, dearly beloved, is God’s good news for all people and all creation.

And when we take it in—I mean really take it in—eat and drink it, allow it to breathe and live and move in us, then, you see, it becomes our Rosetta Stone for understanding how we are to live in this world that God so loves.

The call to follow the Christchild is a lifelong project.

But for the moment, for this night, we lay the future aside and give ourselves fully to the present, allowing ourselves to take in this extraordinary and surprising gift wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in the manger. Amen.

⁴ Henri Nouwen, *Sabbatical Journey*, p.71