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Christmas Eve A 10pm
Peace, Seattle
December 24, 2013
Luke 2:1-20

A NEW POINT OF VIEW

IN THOSE DAYS A DECREE WENT OUT…

Emperors are good at decrees. Kings, governors and governments have been crafting decrees for millennia, and of late, corporations have joined their ranks.

A DECREE WENT OUT, says Luke, and we know what that means.
- The top dog gives the order,
- his underlings draw up plans to implement it,
- the gears of bureaucracy lurch forward,
- and the lives of thousands if not millions are altered and, sometimes, crushed in the process.

So whether or not Luke, in his account, gets all the particulars about this census right is of secondary importance.

The point is he puts his finger on what we all know to be true about the way the world operates:
- Events of consequence are set in motion from the TOP.
- Decisions of import, policies and mandates, originate in Throne Rooms and White House briefing rooms, and congressional pressrooms, and corporate boardrooms, and are disseminated from on high.

But though he begins there at the top, Luke doesn't linger; no. He moves quickly from the halls of power and the likes of Augustus and Quirinius to set his gaze—and ours—on a single pair of sojourners, Joseph and pregnant Mary, who make their way step by step to an obscure little village called Bethlehem.

They are not the only ones traveling, of course. There are many more on the roads, compelled there by the decree from on high. **But it's this couple, and the events that will transpire around them, far below the radar of Rome, that Luke wants us to see and to know: a birth like many—and yet, like none other. The birth of God-with-us.**

The invitation for us tonight, is to enter this story from a different place than what we're accustomed to. To experience it from below.

Now the fact that we all know the story, and (we figure) know it well, can get in the way of our hearing it again, freshly, newly. But let's give it a try.

KUOW has a little program called "SOUND OF THE DAY" in which they invite listeners to send in a 30-second sound-byte and a brief story to go with it.[1]

Listening to those recordings peaks your curiosity. You become a sleuth, listening for recognizable clues that help decipher the sounds you hear. Sometimes figuring out the sound is well nigh impossible.

[1] Here's a link to the program: http://kuow.org/post/sounds-day-111813-112813

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Four weeks ago, the "sound of the day" had these subtle ringing tones in the foreground, while in the background was a rumbling, babbling cacophony I just couldn't make out.

Turns out the sound was two people rubbing their fingers along the rims of the crystal glasses they were washing, making them SING; while the babbling in the background was a houseful of folk engaged in conversation after their Thanksgiving feast.

As soon as words were put to the sounds, I saw and understood it completely.

A week later, the sound was the delighted, giggling voice of a four-month-old baby, responding as his daddy shook leaves for him. You play that sound anywhere in the world, at any time, and people will know it instantly.

In the invitations for tonight's service, we used a graphic with a cow and donkey facing each other over the manger. It invites us to ponder the point of view the infant Jesus had, as he lay in that odd crib.

What did he see as he looked up from that place where he lay? Did he feel the warm breath of the animals as they bent low to see what interloper had taken over their feedbox? Did their wet noses touch his as they nudged him to get to the hay?

Were the sounds and smells of that animal pen frightening? Comforting? Puzzling for the baby?

And what did it mean for God, the Creator of the Universe, to experience that point of view, and all the sensations that came with it, for the very first time?

GOD, NOT looking DOWN from above but UP from below?

With God in the world as never before, does he not see things differently?
With God in the world as never before, should we not listen differently now, perceive differently?
Or would we rather God not be that close?

Ann Weems, in her poem, Unexpected, writes:

Even now we simply do not expect to find a deity in a stable.
Somehow the setting is all wrong: the swaddling clothes too plain, the manger too common for the likes of a Savior, the straw inelegant, the animals, reeking and noisy, the whole scene too ordinary for our taste.

The cast of characters is no better.
With the possible exception of the kings, who among them is fit for this night? The shepherd?
Certainly too crude, the carpenter too rough, the girl too young.
And the baby!
Whoever expected a baby?
Whoever expected the advent of God in a helpless little baby?

Caesar makes his decrees, but the real story unfolds beyond the capital's limits, outside the news cycle, and the only witnesses are a few gnarly sheepherders, whose veracity is in question before they even open their mouths.

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Everything we know about the world declares that the winners write the history.
The people on top get to tell the story.

But tonight, from below, another story is unfolding…a "sub-version" of history.

And this sub-version, the messenger declares, is good news for all the people…ALL.
Not comfortable news, not expected news, but nonetheless good news.

God dwells here, among us. And because God dwells here, there is no place here that is beyond the reach of God's grace; there is no person, however broken, and no situation, however miserable, that is untouchable or irredeemable.

Are you ready for that?

There's a story making the rounds the last few months about an Anonymous Tipper who's dropping extravagant tips of unheard of sums: $100 - $500 - $1000 and more—on unsuspecting waiters and servers from Minneapolis to Los Angeles. A Port Orchard woman got a tip of $5,000. The Tipper has quite a TWITTER following. **His handle: TIPS FOR JESUS**.[2]

Never mind that you have about as much chance of getting one of those tips as winning the lottery, it's just cool to think about the WHAT IF's; and to ponder the WHY's.

The Anonymous Tipper insists on anonymity. And so far, people are willing to grant it.

Sometimes we operate with an image of God as being like that Tipper, you know, OUT THERE SOMEWHERE…DOING GOOD, ANSWERING PRAYERS HERE AND THERE, DROPPING IN NOW AND AGAIN AND, MAYBE, SOMEDAY, SITTING DOWN AT OUR TABLE.

Such a God would drop that unsuspected boon on us, and then disappear, remaining as anonymous as when he came. Is such a God as that Good News?

Tonight, Luke tells us, God is not anonymous. God takes on a specific identity.
God has an address. Because, it turns out, God wants to be known; because, as GK Chesterton said, "God knew we couldn't love anyone we couldn't get our arms around."

But why—WHY would God want to be born today?

A colleague of mine has a son in law, who's firm has been hired by big consumer retailers—TARGET is one of them—to listen to what customers are saying and share that feedback back with the company.

We tend to hear what we want to hear, we grow comfortable in a particular landscape, with particular assumptions about it, and so the business of his company is to listen more deeply.

TARGET and other companies figure that it's worth the cost, in order to get more deeply into their consumers' consciousness; and, ultimately, into their wallets.

[2] Read the article @ http://blogs.seattletimes.com/today/2013/12/port-orchard-bar-staff-to-share-5k-left-by-tips-for-jesus-customer/

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God had lots of practice dealing with humankind before taking form in Mary's womb, and all of that experience, frustrating as it most often was, somehow led God to decide to go about relationship in an entirely new way. God emptied himself, and the result of that empting lies in the manger tonight.

We will never fully plumb that mystery of God with us. But this night, we are invited, nonetheless, to enter into it one more time. And to ponder with Mary, all these things which, in this sub-version of history, affirm the truth that God, in Jesus, is with us for good.

Amen.