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Christmas Eve B
Peace, Seattle
December 24, 2011
Luke 2:1-20

Prayer: Word made flesh, come to us this night, bringing light that scatters our darkness. Help us to see how your birth among us is truly Good News for us, and for all. Amen.

WHO IS THE STORY FOR?

Sisters and brothers, grace, mercy and peace to you from Christ Jesus the Lord. Amen.

We know the story inside and out, don't we? We've heard it year after year for as long as we can remember. The characters are so familiar, they feel like members of our own family.

- A young woman, soon to give birth,
- her loyal fiancé, steady, by her side,
- a journey forced on them at the worst possible time,
- lingering questions about where they will be and what they will do when the baby decides to come.

It's a deeply personal story Luke tells us, but it's set against the coarse canvas of EMPIRE; a backdrop that makes this couple seem so vulnerable. And they are.

For in the eyes of Empire, people—like sheep—are commodities to be managed.
Empires make decrees calling for data, because you cannot manage what you do not quantify.
Therefore—order a census; count the bodies; mandate the taxes; exert control.
Caesar signs the decree and Quirinius sees it done.

This is an even older story: those with power enforce their will; those without submit, or are crushed.
"All the old history is by decree,"[1] and in that realm authority is exercised by fear.
It's the way things are in the dominant version of history.

So when Luke begins his account of this birth by referencing a decree from the Emperor, we feel a ripple of recognition run through us like the pain from an old injury that will never fully heal.

But, dear friends, Luke doesn't leave us there. For his purpose, the reason he tells this story, is to cast light on something wholly NEW unfolding this night. To show us how here, in this most unlikely place, among these most improbable people, a NEW history is beginning in an entirely new way…[2]

Beneath the surface of the Empire's dominant version of reality, Luke says, there is another version—unrehearsed, surprising, bold—a SUB-VERSION—that tells a different story.

In this SUB-VERSION it is not Mary's age or poverty that matters, but her willingness to embrace God's plan. In this SUB-VERSION it is not Joseph's pedigree that carries the day, but his relentless determination to see the journey through.

In this SUB-VERSION, an ARMY, indeed, has been called upon to send a message,

- but their proclamation is not of WAR, but of PEACE;
- their medium is not FEAR, but JOY;
- their means is not WEAPONRY but SONG!

[1] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination,* Second Edition. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) p. 103.
[2] Ibid.

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The sacred news on which the world's foundation pivots, is announced not to the 1%, with a trickle down to the masses; but instead is made known to an anonymous clutch of sheepherders outside a small village in the dead of night.

Is there a less likely bunch to whom you'd entrust news of any importance?
Yet, in God's SUB-VERSION of history, it is precisely to these shepherds, at the bottom of the applicant pool, that the birth of the Savior is first proclaimed.

And so, you see, this story of Jesus' birth compels us to ask for whom is it written?
WHO IS THE MESSAGE FOR?

José (Luis Martín) Descalzo, remembering his years as a chaplain of a girls' school in Spain describes what happened one Christmas Eve night as he was preparing for mass:

> "As I was getting myself ready," he writes, "the sound of singing came to me. The girls had brought out a guitar and were having a sing-along… They sang happily and wholeheartedly, mixing religious songs with the latest tunes. Suddenly I heard the words of an old ballad…
>
> *Does God remember the poor?*
> *Maybe he does, maybe he doesn't.*
> *One thing we know for sure though:*
> *It is at the table of the rich that he eats.*
>
> **I felt as if I had been struck by a whip.** All of a sudden…the sermon I had prepared flew out of my mind and the tremendous harangue I would preach…came surging in…I cried as I delivered it, and the girls cried as they listened. I did not scold them for singing what they had. But I did roar at them that **what they had sung was both an enormous lie and a terrible truth**.
>
> **An enormous lie** because all of us knew that [when] God in the flesh ate in this world, he did not… do it at the table of the rich….he was born in a cave. He shivered with cold… [God] had remembered the poor to the point where he was born like them, worse than most of them.
>
> **But it was also a terrible truth,** because the God we preached and lived was the very God who forgets the poor and who has very little to do with the Child of Bethlehem."[3] José Descalzo.

Who is the message for? For all who find themselves below the threshold of those who matter.

To try to tell the story of the Word made flesh using the language of the old order, the language of history's dominant version, is to eviscerate it.

For what happens in Bethlehem doesn't fit old categories. To shave the rough edges off this story, tidy loose ends, clean up characters, sentimentalize, is to make of it an enormous lie.

For it is precisely these old categories and ways of understanding the world that are now shattered.[4] And this, I believe, is why Luke tells the story in these opening chapters of his gospel by using one song after another. For these songs—in the mouths first of Zechariah and then Mary, in the mouths of the Angels and, finally, Simeon—these songs release energy into the world that no emperor or king can "generate nor prevent."[5]

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[3] José Luis Martín Descalzo, Reasons for Hope. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007) pp. 61-62.
[4] Brueggemann, p. 103, 104.
[5] Ibid, p. 104.

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BE NOT AFRAID, the angel declares. For I AM BRINGING YOU GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY FOR ALL THE PEOPLE. And in chorus the heavenly host replies,

GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST, AND PEACE TO GOD'S PEOPLE ON EARTH!

It is the language of song in our Christmas gospel—not the edicts of empire—that ferry the melody of God's graceful surprise deep into the heart of a sin-captive world.

———————

But it is an irony of our day that even the most potent songs can have their meaning wrung from them. In times such as this, it may be the quiet witness—not the loudest voice—that carries the more potent proclamation.

In the violent border city of Juarez, Mexico, a group of young Christians have become modern day angel-messengers who go out into the city in a silent protest against murder and corruption.[6]

> On a recent Saturday morning in the barrio called *Tierra Nueva*, at the ragged edge of Juarez, fifteen young people glue goose down recovered from cast-off comforters onto plastic wings. Others smear on silver makeup. The scene is not that different from any church youth group preparing for a Christmas pageant. But that's about to change.
>
> "What we're doing here," says Carlos Mayorga, their youth leader, "is preparing signs and wings and robes, so that we can go out into the streets to give our message of peace to this dangerous border city."
>
> With their silver makeup complete, the young people pile into a decrepit green van…and make their way to the first stop of the day…
>
> Pulling up in front of a supermarket at a busy intersection the angels take their positions on street corners and medians. Standing on folding chairs in long white robes with wings unfurled, they loom like giants.
>
> In a city that averages five or six murders a day, these silent angels hold signs that read, "Assassin repent, Christ loves you" and, "Corrupt police, look for God." After 20 minutes they depart for their next location: a death scene where evidence is still being gathered.
>
> When their silent witness in done, they gather around a group of neighbors and pray with them for employment, for better living conditions, for salvation from sin, and for an end to the murders.
>
> "When we began this campaign," says Patricia, a co-pastor of the tiny church, "we were a little afraid because we were addressing murderers and corrupt police. But we're in God's hands, and we are not afraid now."

"BE NOT AFRAID, declares the Angel Messenger of Luke's gospel, FOR I AM BRINGING YOU GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY FOR ALL THE PEOPLE."

Who is the message for?

[6] *Angels Send Message Of Peace To Juarez, Mexico,* by NPR correspondent John Burnett, aired December 21, 2011. This is an edited transcript. You can listen to Burnett's full story about the modern day angels by following this link: http://www.npr.org/2011/12/19/143827542/angels-send-message-of-peace-to-juarez-mexico

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The message is for shepherds and others who live in the margins; for courageous teenagers on the streets of Juarez, for the last, the least, and the lost—everyone who in the eyes of Empire don't count.

But it is not also for corrupt policeman and drug dealers?

We all have our lists of those for whom this message of good news cannot apply.
And indeed, Christ comes into a world where sin in all its brutal manifestations rules.

But he will break that rule, not through superior cunning or technical savvy, not through greater firepower or bigger or higher or stronger anything. But through love that drinks life's cup to the dregs and pours itself out—all of it, every last drop—willingly, even to the point of death on a cross.

Who is the gospel for? It's for you and for me. For old and young, skeptical and trusting, the 99 and the 1; for all, whether we can see our need for it or not.

God meets us here, at the manger, in all our ambiguity and uncertainty, and begins again to make the world anew.

Amen.