

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

Kirby Lawrence Hill
December 24, 2016
Christmas Eve
Isaiah 9:2-7
Luke 2:1-14

A HIGHER DECREE

“In those days a decree went out.” Those are the seven words that begin the birth narrative from Luke that so enriches our celebration of the nativity of our Lord. We are told the decree went out from Caesar Augustus. I have to imagine it would be a gargantuan effort for such a communication to be delivered throughout the Roman Empire in that day and age. For instance, the distance between Rome and Jerusalem is over 1400 miles as the crow flies, and it was not crows who would deliver such news there and elsewhere. In those days when such a decree went out, it would have to go out in some directions across the Mediterranean Sea and in some directions over mountains. When it reached its destination, I imagine loud trumpets blaring and communication officers going all over the place – “Hear ye, hear ye, give heed to this royal decree. All subjects of the empire must be registered in your home town in the coming days.” Then, in response, come the groans. With the limits of transportation options at that time, to obey the decree would have been no small feat for those who did not live in their home towns. But a brazen Augustus didn’t care about the difficulties his decree created. He was Caesar – making decrees is what he did and obeying them is what everyone else had to do.

My family was blessed to get to be in Rome in August where we toured the Palatine Hill. Ten years ago, archaeologists announced the discovery of where they believe Augustus was born right there on that hill where emperors reigned. The aristocratic two story house was built around an atrium, with fancy frescoed walls and mosaic flooring. Augustus came from prominence, with a father who had been governor of Syria, who held the highest elected office in Rome, who was a descendent of Alexander the Great, with a mother who was Julius Caesar’s niece.¹ Augustus’ rise to power was not automatic – he had to show his willingness to use power to get to the throne and he indeed got there where he could issue a decree and people across the whole empire would have to jump. His command that all be registered communicated to the people quite clearly that the emperor did not act to serve the needs of the people, but in order that the people could meet the needs and whims of the empire. There’s a big difference between people being counted and the clear understanding that everyone counts. The registration was put in place so taxes could be extracted to pay for the very military occupation that placed a stranglehold on people throughout the empire.

The immediate effect of Augustus’ decree on Joseph and Mary was that they had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, 70 miles as the crow flies, but of course a crow didn’t carry them. Luke tells us that Joseph’s lineage went back to David, Israel’s greatest king, so they had to travel to David’s home town of Bethlehem to be registered. Mary, who was near her delivery date, was engaged to Joseph, so he couldn’t leave her at home. By the timing of Caesar’s decree, Bethlehem is where they were when it came time for Mary to be delivered. Through that birth came a totally different kind of pronouncement than the one issued by Augustus.

Mary Ann Bird wrote a memoir called “The Whisper Test.” According to the account, Mary Ann had been born with multiple physical problems. She was deaf in one ear, and had a cleft palate. Her face was disfigured with a nose that was not straight. She had lopsided feet. She suffered not only from these physical differences, but also from the emotional damage inflicted by other children, who can be so cruel toward a child who is different. “Oh Mary Ann,” they taunted her, “what happened to your lip?” She would lie in her reply saying, “I cut it on a piece of glass.” One of the worst experiences at school, she reported, was the day of the annual hearing test. Without use of precise equipment, the teacher would call each child to her desk, and the child would cover first one ear,

and then the other. The teacher would whisper something to the child like “the sky is blue” or “you have new shoes.” This was “the whisper test.” If the teacher’s phrase could be heard and repeated, the child passed the test. To avoid the humiliation of failure, Mary Ann would always cheat on the test, secretly cupping her hand over her one good ear so that she could still hear what the teacher said. One year Mary Ann was in the class of Miss Leonard, one of the most beloved teachers in the school. Every student, including Mary Ann, wanted to be noticed by her, wanted to be her pet. Then came the day of the dreaded hearing test. When her turn came, Mary Ann was called to the teacher’s desk. As Mary Ann cupped her hand over her good ear, Miss Leonard leaned forward to whisper. “I waited for those words,” Mary Ann wrote, “which God must have put into her mouth, those seven words which changed my life.” Miss Leonard did not say, “The sky is blue,” or “You have new shoes.” No, Miss Leonard carefully leaned over to get as close as possible and whispered, “I wish you were my little girl.”²

That’s similar to the pronouncement that God issued over two thousand years ago. To a hearing impaired humanity, God did not send out trumpeters and teams of communicators to deliver a royal decree. Instead God leans down and whispers through the birth of a poor child saying, “I have come into your world because I wish you were mine. You count with me. I am committed to your wellbeing. I love you.” It was not a prominent birth by worldly standards. The new parents didn’t even have a place of their own on the night of his birth and had to place the newborn in a hay trough instead of a crib. But through this birth, a divine pronouncement is issued that speaks far more powerfully than any emperor-issued decree accompanied by blaring trumpets and legions of troops. This highest of all communiqués is not limited by time or location. The message reverberates across the centuries and still comes to us. In the words of a carol, “How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given. So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven. No ear may hear his coming but in this world of sin where meek souls will receive him still the dear Christ enters in.”³ On this night of all nights, God leans low and whispers in our ear, “I wish you to be mine. You count with me. I am committed to your wellbeing. I love you.” And with that pronouncement, a different kind of reign has begun. Glory be to God in the highest! Amen.

¹ Information taken from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augustus> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palatine_Hill

² Thomas G. Long, Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2004. 85-86

³ From “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” written by Phillips Brooks, 1868.