

What Love Looks Like

Luke 2:1-14 *About that time, Caesar Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Empire. This was the first census when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone had to travel to his own ancestral hometown to be accounted for. So Joseph went from the Galilean town of Nazareth up to Bethlehem in Judah, David's town, for the census. As a descendant of David, he had to go there. He went with Mary, his fiancée, who was pregnant.*

While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. She gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in a manger, because there was no room in the hostel.

There were shepherders camping in the neighborhood. They had set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger."

At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's praises: "Glory to God in the heavenly heights, Peace to all men and women on earth who please him." As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the shepherders talked it over. "Let's get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us." They left, running, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, lying in the manger. Seeing was believing. They told everyone they met what the angels had said about this child. All who heard the shepherders were impressed.

Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself. The shepherders returned and let loose, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen. It turned out exactly the way they'd been told!

John 3:16-17 *This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed: by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again.*

Merry Christmas, my brothers and sisters. Oh, we have heard this story from the Gospel of Luke many times, haven't we — this story of the birth of Jesus, our Savior. It is a story of good news of great joy.

But for starters today, I'm not going to talk about good news of great joy. I'm going to talk about politics. You see, this past year, when politics ruled our nation and imaginations in one of the most unusual presidential elections our nation has known, the first two verses of this familiar text stood out. Luke wants us to know the political realities of the day when this Savior was born. If it were our day we would say, "In the day when Obama was president, Trump was president-elect and Snyder was governor of Michigan, a young, unmarried teenager and her fiancé from Flint traveled to Galien," or something like that.

But we are told that Augustus was the head honcho and Quirinius was governor of Syria. While the rule of Augustus Caesar was seen by many as a time of peace in comparison with the Caesars who came before him, he still was not a very nice guy. He had people executed who didn't agree with him. He went through a number of wives. And the Roman Empire was all about money, sex and power and expansion. Indeed, the Roman Empire did expand under Augustus Caesar and covered an area in southern Europe, the Middle East and throughout North Africa that was bigger than our United States is today.

Luke wants us to know that this Jesus was being born into a particular political reality. His parents were sent on an almost preposterous journey — with Mary 9 months' pregnant — and

they had to go register just so they could be taxed so that these head honchos would have the money they needed to keep expanding their kingdom.

And in the meanwhile, the little people, especially the lower-class people like the Jews — like Mary and Joseph — would work way too hard to eke out a life with unjust and selfish leaders sopping up all the power and resources.

Perfect Gift, Perfectly Horrible Circumstances

A little over a week ago, I got together with a couple of clergy colleagues, and one of them told me that she was having a very difficult time thinking about preaching for Christmas this year. How could she preach after the kind of year we have had, when the world is so full of violence? The troubles in Syria and Russia, and ongoing struggle in the Middle East, are terrifying. What about ISIS and terror cells in Tunisia? We've had a year of growing racial violence and tension in our own country. And this presidential election has left many people fearful for our future. How could she preach a happy, cheery Christmas sermon in the middle of all that?

But you see, my brothers and sisters, this Christmas story took place at a time that was full of "all that." The political and social realities of Jesus' day were in many ways much worse than those we face today.

And think of Mary and Joseph. Mary was an unwed mother who got pregnant out of wedlock. In that day she could have been stoned to death for that, but Joseph came to her rescue. He either believed her preposterous story or stood by her in the middle of it. They not only had all that to deal with, they were forced to go on this trip for the sole purpose of pleasing the Roman government, which didn't care a thing about them except for their money anyway. Sometimes we talk with people who seem to have everything going against them, don't we? Well, this is the way it was for Mary and Joseph.

But it is in the middle of this “all that,” and in the middle of terrible personal problems for Mary and Joseph, that Christmas comes. This joyous holiday, where there is pressure to make everything perfect, first came in the most imperfect circumstances we can imagine.

Another one of my colleagues, Rev. Barrett Lee from North Presbyterian in Kalamazoo, writes: *If Christmas can't be celebrated in the midst of "poop" (he uses another word here), then it shouldn't be celebrated at all. If the mystery of the Incarnation doesn't matter in the midst of a world that has gone to "poop" (he uses that other word here, too!), then it doesn't matter.*

Love Meets Us Here, Too

And the amazing thing is that God chose to send God's son into some of the yuckiest parts of that world, in the most difficult of circumstances. He was born in the middle of a time when the people must have been so frustrated. Can you imagine having our president dictate to us — no choice — “Everybody, drop what you are doing and go to your birthplace so we can register you and count you so we can tax you more”? You might say, “But I'm 9 months' pregnant, or my mother is dying, or I'm an invalid and can't move.” The response: “Tough luck. Do it. Get there. I need your money.”

So Mary, 9 months' pregnant, an unmarried, most likely shunned woman, and Joseph, a poor simple carpenter, go to Bethlehem, and this baby is born in probably the smelliest place — next to a latrine — that there could be on the planet. Why this? Why this kind of place and these kinds of people?

Because, my friends, that is what love does. Love seeks to meet us in the most lowly and difficult places of our lives.

We have all been through tough times in our lives. Life has tough times, right? And we can all remember those people who we thought were our friends who went off the radar screen when

our worlds got shaky. But true friends hang in there when times get tough. That's what love does.

And maybe that is why Jesus came when he did in the way he did. He was born smack dab into the middle of poverty and loneliness. And let's not forget the shepherds. If you lived back then, the last person you would want to show up at your house, and probably much less at the bed of your newborn child, was a shepherd. Smelly, disconnected, surely uneducated.

But in the middle of all this, the lowliest, most hopeless times, the times when the political realities were anything but secure, love shows up. God sends Jesus.

Because that's what love does. Love shows up and stays — not only in the best of times, but also in the worst of times.

For You, and You, and You and ...

And the angels told the shepherd that this baby was born for THEM. "Unto YOU is born this day." The pronoun here in the Greek is a personal YOU. Luke wants us to know that. This is for YOU.

If we think about that, it is strange. The baby was born to Mary and Joseph and their family. Not to a group of unrelated outcasts. I mean, when Kellie or Ashley or Jen had their babies, they called the family and said, "We had a boy, or we had a girl." They wouldn't call a bunch of people they didn't know and say "a baby is born unto YOU." But this baby was born not just for Mary, Joseph and their families, but for ALL the world. For the shepherds and for YOU.

That's what love does. It doesn't exclude anyone. It's for all the YOUs — all of us.

And this baby, this Jesus, grew into a boy who blew everyone's mind at his Bar Mitzvah. He was smart and wise and probably was headed for the likes of Yale Divinity School or Harvard Law.

But he continued to hang out with the lowly and the forgotten. He healed people and ate and drank with prostitutes and sinners. That's what love looks like.

And then he died a terrible death because he couldn't stop this kind of loving. He gave his life for each of us. Because that is what LOVE does.

Love Has Come, Love Has Come

So, my brothers and sisters, this year, amid the political realities and troubles of our day, amid the trials and difficulties in our own lives, let us receive this child into our lives and world once again. Love has come, once again. Because that is what love does. And as we receive this love, may we ask for the grace to follow this child who will lead us in the ways of peace and love. Our world and our lives need that more than ever.

So, my brothers and sisters, in joy and in sorrow, in times of political ease and political unrest, for all people in all places:

Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given. And his name is called Jesus. Do not be afraid. Glory to God in the Highest! And on earth, peace among all people.

Love has come. Love has come.

Merry Christmas.