

# Hidden in Plain Sight

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There are really two schools of thought about what a Christmas sermon should be.

On the one side, there are folks who go in for something warm and cozy. The idea here is to give people a gift, like fuzzy slippers or a mug of cocoa by the light of the tree. My colleagues who espouse this way of thinking will look at the fact that there will be any number of guests worshipping with us tonight, and try to help them, and all of us, walk away feeling good.

The other school of thought is to offer a barn burner! Again, thinking of the guests worshipping with us tonight, these folks go in a completely different direction. Instead of offering the equivalent of spiritual comfort food, these preachers seek to offer something vibrant and spicy. Their rationale is that, if we're only going to see someone every so often, we need to give them something that will sustain them over the long haul, and maybe even motivate them into coming back for more.

In a show of hands, who thinks I'm going to go the warm and cozy, "play it safe" route?

Ha! You think you know me so well! I'm actually going to TRY to do both!

You see, the reality is the Christmas story is hugely political. In fact, even the churches who try to say the Christmas story is not political are actually taking a stance politically, in that whole, "silence benefits the oppressor" sort of way. It's not partisan, but it is political in the deeply human, what kind of a world shall we build together sense. What's more, if Christmas in particular, and truthfully following Jesus writ large, is to have any impact at all, it is our job to tease out the throughlines, to look to see how this age old story still has lessons to teach us in our current context.

You see, authors of the Christmas story, in both the Gospel of Matthew and in the Gospel of Luke, have hidden some messages for us in plain sight. Mary's song is a case in point, with her celebration of "lifting up the lowly" and "bringing down the powerful from their thrones" (Luke 1:52). I won't pick out just one major news story from this year as an example; I'll let you do that.

Think of ANY story that has been in the headlines and read it through the lens of lifting up the lowly and bringing down the powerful from their thrones. And this is just the first chapter.

(My friends at the Salt Project published a brilliant piece, "Rethinking Christmas Eve," which will form the bulk of the rest of my reflections below.)

Luke starts chapter 2 with a sentence that should stop us in our tracks, "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered" (Luke 2:1).

All the world!

Think of the sheer ambition in that decree, the totalitarian appetite. A single, comprehensive grid meant to fall across the whole creation, fixing its coordinates, seizing everything in a single grasp, capturing everyone the way a hidden net, camouflaged in the leaves, suddenly springs up and around its prey.

Alexa has nothing on Caesar Augustus!

Why does Caesar Augustus want the whole world to register? Luke's early listeners would know right away, of course: for taxes, for tribute to the empire, for extracting value in order to build palaces and armies — in short, for strengthening the imperial grip. In first century Palestine, a census was not about providing social services. And Luke's listeners would know, too, the implicit threat of force in such a decree, the unsaid "or else," the chill in the air as the grim news spread far and wide.

And so "all went to their towns to be registered" — everyone, even the sick and infirm, even a pregnant woman on the verge of giving birth. The image is Orwellian, a glimpse of the forced marches and bureaucratic control of authoritarian regimes to come. The Nazis, for example, with their meticulous records, took after Augustus. And so the beginning of the Jesus story, so far from a romantic Christmas card, sounds a clear note of imperial dominion and icy menace.

(One can almost hear the Darth Vader Imperial March cueing us into the mood of what is unfolding.)

Christmas begins not only with Gabriel's announcement to Mary about lifting up the lowly, but also with the tyrant's announcement, his audacious, intimidating attempt at universal control.

But God will slip through Caesar's net — and even use it for divine purposes, like a masterful, mischievous trickster, for it is the decree that brings the family from Nazareth to Bethlehem, where it is foretold that the Messiah was to be born. But even in Bethlehem, God will be born beyond the coordinates of imperial surveillance. No address, no trackable trail.

Even Amazon isn't finding this family.

This is the deep meaning of "no room in the inn." God arrives, but beyond the reach of the emperor's grasp. God is off the grid, hidden with the animals, as yet unnamed (the child isn't named until the 8th day (Luke 2:21)). In brief, God is homeless, anonymous, incognito...unregistered...undocumented. This is the story's most conspicuous dramatic tension. On one side, the emperor's attempt to control the world through registration, and on the other, God's unregistered arrival.

And then just in case we missed it that theme, the story of the shepherds drives the point home. The shepherds don't live in the towns, but rather up in the surrounding hills. They, too, have no addresses, and in the story, no names. They are "living in the fields," flouting the emperor's

decree, for they have not “returned to their towns” to be registered. They are the unrecorded, the undocumented. They live in imperial territory, but beyond the emperor’s control.

And sure enough, of all the people in all the world, they are the ones singled out to receive the world-changing good news. They are the ones to whom the angels sing. They are the ones who receive the strange directions of how to find the unfindable child. The unregistered shepherds are told of the unregistered savior in the city of David and so they go to him, to find him and admire him and pay him their respects. He’s one of us! they say to each other. He lives beyond the empire’s dominion! He sleeps with the creatures! He lies in a manger!

And then, the coup de grace: the nameless shepherds issue their own public pronouncement, their counter-decree, passing on to all what the angels proclaimed to them: “Good news of great joy for all people; for unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior!”

## **Conclusion**

The emperor says, “All the world!”

The shepherds say, “For all people!”

Two decrees, together establishing the central dramatic tension not just of Christmas, but of the whole Jesus story.

So by all means, let’s light candles and sing carols and gather around the tables of love.

But at the same time, let’s recall the world-turning, subversive promises of Christmas, the radiant good news that God comes to lift up the lowly, to honor the unregistered, to privilege the underprivileged and to oppose every imperial attempt, yesterday and today and forevermore, to control, extract, and hoard the blessings of creation.

Gloria, in excelsis Deo!

Note: The bulk of this year’s sermon came from Rethinking Christmas Eve by the Salt Project: <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/12/23/rethinking-christmas-eve>.

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