

**Scripture: Luke 2:1-20**

---

2:1 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled.  
2:2 This was the first enrollment, when Quirin'i-us was governor of Syria.  
2:3 And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city.  
2:4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David,  
2:5 to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.  
2:6 And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered.  
2:7 And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.  
2:8 And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.  
2:9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear.  
2:10 And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people;  
2:11 for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.  
2:12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."  
2:13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,  
2:14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!"  
2:15 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."  
2:16 And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.  
2:17 And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child;  
2:18 and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.  
2:19 But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.  
2:20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

**Communion Meditation**

---

If you are like I am, at the end of 2011 I am tired of hearing the news.

I am weary of politics: primaries, debates, congressional stand offs. It has been a year of tyrants weeping in Libya and Egypt, but oppression and bombings continue in places like Syria. And yesterday in Colorado, a 3 year-old shot a 5 year-old in the chest. The father is being charged with neglect.

I think that is why we love the Christmas story. We are ready for good news.

I am ready to hear the news of salvation and deliverance for all God's children.

I want to hear angels singing and kneel once again at the manger  
where the baby Jesus lies cooing.

But Luke will not let us get away from politics and real people.

The Christmas story is fraught with signs that this is more than a feel-good, sweet story. Luke reminds us that Caesar Augustus is in charge of the empire, or the known world at the time. The governor of Syria is Quirinius. Mary and Joseph are subjects of the Empire who have to travel to their hometowns to be taxed. And there is nothing more political than taxes.

It is into the messed-up power plays, occupation of this peasant people, and forsaken world, that Jesus comes.

Jesus is born into dark times.

Darkness has taken over.

A Savior is desperately needed.

The good news of Jesus' birth comes to the underdogs of the day, lowly shepherds keeping watch in their fields by night.

It is into the darkness of the world, that Jesus comes to bring light and life.

Like in times past, God shows up to a slave people and sets them free from Pharaoh's control, they live in the desert for 40 years sustained by the bread from heaven, manna, and the guardrails of the law to help them be a community of faithful people.

No one said that salvation and freedom is easy.

And it will not be easy for Mary, Joseph, and Jesus,

for his birth sparks a slaughter of the innocents by King Herod,

and the little family must flee to safety in Egypt of all places.

So if you are ready to be done with political jockeying, then you may want to skip the

Christmas story this year. Because God appears to be in the business of upsetting the applecart of the powerful who do not seek the welfare of God's children.

God is in the business of birthing new life and hope in the form of his vulnerable, diaper wet, Son who is born to bring good news to the poor,

freedom to captives, and sight to the blind.

But does it really happen anymore?

Does God still send messengers to bring good news of great joy and peace among those God favors?

In all the bad news, are the angels still making announcements to shepherds working the late shift?

Gregory Boyle is a Jesuit priest who has worked for over 20 years in the toughest neighborhoods in LA. He writes in *Tattoos on the Heart*<sup>1</sup> about his work there. He tells stories about the mostly Hispanic men and women that he has encountered. His job is to help people find jobs. "Nothing stops a bullet like a job." is the motto of Homeboy Industries, a collection of small businesses that Boyle created which include a bakery, a café, and a print shop. Father Boyle and his ministry is literally in the business of saving lives.

He tells the story of Luis, in his mid 20s who was one of the biggest, savviest drug dealers the community had ever known. He and Father Boyle, who is called G by his parishioners, knew each other for over a decade. G was always trying to offer Luis a job. Luis was always turning him down. Then when Luis' daughter Tiffany was born and things changed. Luis went to work in the bakery. With Luis' leadership skills he rose to position of foreman. Part of his job description was to give tours and greet visitors. One day a group of farmers came to take a tour, and Luis described their visit. The conversation went like this, Father Boyle asked how the tour went.

"Dang, G." Luis shakes his head. "What's up with white people anyway?"

I don't know what's up with us?

I mean dang, they're always using the word 'great'."

"We do?" Asks father Boyle

“Oh yeah, this group of farmers come in and see the machines working and the place is clean, and they say, ‘This place is great.’

Then they see the homies, the enemies, working together and say, ‘These fellas are great.’ Then they taste our bread, and they say, ‘This bread tastes great.’

Why are white people always using the word ‘great?’”

I tell him, ‘I don’t know.’ But trust me every opportunity I could find, I would tell him how great he is just to mess with him a little bit.

Boyle writes about an incident with Luis. They are closing the bakery one night and Luis says, “Hey G, you’re not going to believe what happened to me yesterday after my shift.”

Luis proceeds to tell me that after work he goes to pick up his 4 year old daughter Tiffany at the babysitter’s. He puts her in the car. They drive to their tiny apartment where Luis is paying rent with honestly clean money for the first time. They go inside. Tiffany firmly plants her feet and extends her arms upwards and looks around the living room and says,

“This is great!”

“What is great, Tiffany?”

“My home.”

Boyle writes that Luis seems to be unable to speak as he tells this story.

“Our eyes meet and our souls well up at the same time. I point at him and say, ‘You did this. You never had a home in your life and now you have one. You did this.

You were the biggest drug dealer in town and you stopped and now you bake bread instead. You never had a father in your life and now you are one.

I hate to tell you this, but you are great!”

Salvation, deliverance, and freedom are hard work.

We cannot gloss over the challenges into which Jesus came.

Nor can we gloss over the reality of sin in our world today.

The Hebrew children wandering in the wilderness for 40 years before getting to the promised land, knew that freedom and salvation require courage and a strong dose of dependence on God who rains down bread from heaven.

Working for justice and peace, are hard work as Father Boyles, G and Luis knows.

Standing up to the gangs, the Herods, and the system takes courage.

Another chapter to Luis’s story, a few months after the time when Tiffany declared her home to be great, Luis was loading his car in the projects to go on a camping trip with his friends. Two gang members with their faces covered entered the enemies’ territory looking for someone to take out. They saw Luis and thought, “He’ll do.” They walked up to him, and they shot him dead.

I hear that and want to cry out to God, “Why would you want to be born into this?”

Jesus the Christ, God’s Word made flesh and vulnerable in his humanity, why would you not want to stay mighty and powerful, safely removed in the highest heaven from human pain and suffering? Call the whole thing off, God. Do not be born of Mary. Do not be laid in a borrowed manger. Stop, before it is too late. For this is a brutal,

bleeding world. Train your troops of angels to swoop down and march against the hurt and harm, selfishness and greed. Stay high and mighty, Word of God made flesh.<sup>2</sup>

Then I hear God's messenger whispering in the night,  
"This side of heaven, things are incomplete.

I come into the world to redeem it, not to avoid it.

I come into the world to show you the way, the truth, and the life.

I make my home here so that you and all my children might have life and have it abundantly.

And I do not come in violence, but in peace.

I come to demonstrate the kingdom of God.

I offer you my body broken and my blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus, says, 'I am the life-giving bread of heaven'"

Justice is incomplete, but that doesn't stop God.

Sin and corruption are real, but that doesn't stop God from coming anyway.  
and it should not stop us.

God is at work in our world and when God enters into this world,  
empires crumple, tyrants weep, a candle is lit to dispel the darkness.

Jesus, God's word, made flesh is born in us this night and every time the homeless find shelter, the hungry our fed, the powerful oppressors are brought low,  
and the hearts of men, women, and children, turn again to God  
and we ponder this good news of salvation.

Tonight this table becomes the manger and we feed on the bread of life

so that God might live and work through us even as we wait for that truly great day when wars cease and the world is made complete by the merciful power of God.

Now, won't that be just great?

Laura Smith Conrad  
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church  
December 24, 2011

- 1 Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart; the Power of Boundless Compassion*. With great thanks to Amy Miracle for her sharing this in sermon at Montreat's Leadership Institute, October 2011.
- 2 Thomas Troeger, *Sermon Sparks*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville) 2011, p. 49.