

“The Gift of a Vulnerable God”

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Based upon Luke 2:1-10; Romans 8:31-39

“In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.” Even people in today’s biblically-illiterate world recognize those words easily, if not from *The Gospel of Luke*, then from Linus’ speech in the *Charlie Brown Christmas Special*. These words set the stage for the miracle which is Christ’s birth, by providing us with a reason for Mary and Joseph’s trip to Bethlehem. But as important as these rulers are to the story, we don’t usually spend a lot of time pondering the implications of Jesus’ being born when they were in power. Once we figure out how to pronounce Quirinius, we move on to the good part where the baby is born, wrapped in swaddling clothes, laid in a manger, and visited by shepherds and the heavenly host.

Today, before we get to the manger and the shepherds, however, I want us to take a moment to appreciate the scene that Luke set up, because he was not just trying to provide a history lesson about who was in power when Jesus was born, a lesson which has very little to do with us now, he was also trying to provide a theology lesson about God’s power which is deeply relevant to us now. The latter lesson is really the more important one because Luke got the facts wrong in the history lesson part. There was no worldwide census, at least not when Caesar Augustus, and Herod the Great, and Quirinius all held power. We know this because Herod the Great died at least a decade before Quirinius began counting heads in his territory. You can make of that what you will. Whether this means that Luke got his Herods wrong, which would be easy to do because there were lots of them—Herod the Great, Herod Archelaus, Herod Antipas, Herod Agrippa—or that Luke remembered a local census that Quirinius ordered, but got the date wrong, or that Luke made the whole birth narrative up, we don’t know. But it doesn’t really matter because the story hasn’t survived for thousands of years because of the historicity of its details. It has survived for thousands of years because of what it teaches us about who Christ was, and how God saves us through him. That lesson is found in the contrast between the human powers-that-be in the story, and the power of God in the manger.

Caesar Augustus, born Octavian, was the ultimate human power when Jesus was born. When Augustus was born, the ancient equivalent of press releases were sent out spreading the good news, (using the word *euangelion* — same word we translate as “gospel”), that the “son of the god” had been born who would usher in an age of peace. The god they were talking about wasn’t Yahweh, however; it was Augustus’ adopted dad, Julius Caesar, who had been deified as “the divine Julius” in 42 B.C.E. So that made Augustus, at least in the eyes of the Romans, “son of the divine.” Augustus did usher in an age of peace of sorts, known as the Pax Romana. During his reign the Empire experienced less warfare than it had in centuries. But it wasn’t a true peace created by reconciling all peoples and all nations, or ensuring that everyone was equally blessed and beloved. It certainly wasn’t the shalom of the Kingdom of God. Augustus’ peace was a peace created and kept by military force, as well as bribery and distraction programs like the famous one called “bread and circuses” by some, which provided food and entertainment to some of the masses in order to keep the oppressed from rising up.

Quirinius, the governor of Syria, also liked to use his power to control his subjects. He did issue at least one local census when he was governor, in order to be able to get more taxes from the people of his domain. The Jews, who were already oppressed and impoverished, were so outraged by the census that a bunch of them banded together to form a sect known as the Zealots, whose desire was to overthrow Roman occupation by force. So, if it was Quirinius' census which prompted Mary and Joseph to be registered, then that means that at the time that Jesus was being born, Quirinius' actions were also giving birth to the movement which would inspire both Judas Iscariot, the disciple who would one day betray Christ, and the criminal Barabbas, whom Pilate would release instead of Christ. Both Judas and Barabbas were Zealots.

Anyway, into this world, where the powers-that-be ruled without justice or mercy, and force and authority went hand-in-hand, Luke's gospel proclaims that Jesus, the son of the one true God, Yahweh, was born. Jesus did not show up on earth fully formed, dressed as a warrior riding a mighty steed. He did not come as the son of an emperor, king, or governor. He was not born in a palace or any place that would have been seen as consequential by the people in power at the time. Christ came into the world as a helpless infant, the child of a poor, displaced, oppressed couple of nobodies, who pretty much remained nobodies until he died. Christ was born, in other words, about as far from the powerful worlds and ways of Augustus and Quirinius as you could get. From the moment of his conception his life was in jeopardy. Mary could have been stoned to death for being pregnant outside of marriage; she also could have died of starvation or abuse if Joseph had divorced her quietly. Jesus was not born invincible, at least not the human part of him. Just the opposite, Jesus of Nazareth was born and lived in a state of acute vulnerability.

“Vulnerable.” “Vulnerability.” These words have been in the press this past week because national agencies have discovered that using these words turn off the powers-that-be. They are on a short list of effectively-banned, if not yet legally-banned words because the people who control the money and the power in our nation do not want to read them or hear them. They don't want to acknowledge vulnerability in others or themselves or our nation. That “vulnerable” should be a taboo word for agencies charged with caring for those in need is outrageous and disturbing on multiple levels. But in some ways, it's not really surprising at all. Americans were uncomfortable with vulnerability long before this Orwellian development happened. Vulnerable in our culture means defenseless. Vulnerable means exposed. Vulnerable is the opposite of secure and strong and successful, the opposite of what we think of when we hear the word “powerful.” Most of us spend a great deal of time and energy and money throughout our lives trying to do whatever we can to ensure that we are not vulnerable, me included.

But Jesus did not. He joined humanity right in the place which makes us the most uncomfortable, in the depths and darkness of human vulnerability, and in the end, he made vulnerability divinely blessed. He also changed the world by demonstrating through his choice of vulnerability a power which human beings still can't quite wrap their minds around, one which made Augustus' and Quirinius' and Herod's powers look pathetic: the saving power of love.

There is an old Christmas story which explains what Jesus did beautifully.¹ The story goes that there was a man who did not believe in the Incarnation in Christ, or the spiritual meaning of Christmas. He ridiculed those who believed, arguing, including his wife, “Why would a powerful God lower himself and become like us? What kind of salvation is that?” Then one day while his wife and kids were at church without him, a snow storm turned into a blizzard. The man was relaxing by his fireplace when he heard a thump against his window, and then another one. He looked outside, but it was too windy and snowy to see anything. So he went outside and discovered that a flock of geese had been caught in the storm. Blinded by the snow they were flying in circles and crashing into his house.

The man wanted to help the geese, so he went to his barn and opened the barn door for them. He watched, hoping they would see the open door and take shelter in the barn. But they just fluttered around not going inside. So he started whistling to them. Still nothing. He shouted, waved his arms, but they wouldn’t come over. When he moved closer to them, they moved away out of fear. So he got some bread and left a trail to the barn. They still didn’t catch on. Nothing he tried could get them into the warmth and safety of the shelter, the one place where they could survive the storm. “Why don’t they listen to me!” he cried. “Can’t they see I’m trying to save them!” Then he realized the only way he could get them to follow him is if he were a goose not a human being. “If only I could become like one of them,” he thought, “then I could show them the way to safety.” Suddenly he realized that that was what the Incarnation of Christ was about: God coming into the midst of the storm with us, to show us the way to safety. It was the best way God could think of to get us to pay attention, trust him, and follow.

Now there are plenty of people who think that if God is all powerful, it would have been far better for God to get rid of blizzards than to become a goose in the midst of one for us. Whether God did not do that because God cannot stop all storms, or cannot interfere with human free will, or for some other reason we don’t know. But we do know thanks to Luke and the other gospel writers that God did come into the storm with us to show us the way. God risked God’s life, and ultimately gave it, so that we would know the way to safety and know that we are not alone. God came with the power of love, not force, and that love was so great that even the powers-that-be in Jesus’ day couldn’t stop it. They tried. They tried to tell Jesus what he could and couldn’t say, and what he could and couldn’t do, and when he didn’t listen, they took his life. But he was always more powerful than they, and because he was motivated by love for humanity, not the desire to control it, he responded by giving us a kind of life that no power, not even the power of death can take.

If God had come into the world as a military leader with force and threats, we would have been scared of God, (as people before Christ used to be), and never known that we are loved. If God had come into the world as a great judge, we would have hidden because we are all deeply imperfect sinners. So God came in a state of acute vulnerability offering love and forgiveness, so that we would know that God understands how fragile and flawed we are, and will never leave us alone or let us go, no matter what.

¹ See “A Christmas Classic: The Man and the Birds by Paul Harvey”, Everyday Christian Biblical Truths for Everyday Life, published Dec. 17, 2010 by Keiki Hendrix, retrieved from http://www.everydaychristian.com/blogs/post/christmas_classics_the_man_and_the_birds_by_paul_harvey/

There is an odd, yet very moving little movie called *Second Best*, starring William Hurt, which captures what a gift this is with people instead of geese. It's hard to find, but if you get a chance to watch it, I recommend it. In the movie, Hurt plays "Graham," a 40-something year old, socially-awkward Welshman who was neglected by his parents as a child. After deciding that he's going to be the loving father that he never had, Graham adopts a ten-year-old boy, "James," who is in foster care after a rough first decade as well. The boy's father was an abusive addict who spun wild tales about being a mercenary for his son, and taught him to go into the woods and dig a hole and hide there when danger was around. Graham and James have a tough time connecting at first, but eventually the love between them grows. Then just as their relationship is gelling, the boy's biological father shows up dying of AIDS. The boy is so horrified to discover the truth about the man that he had all-but deified in his memories, that he goes into the woods, digs a hole like a grave, and curls up in it to die. Graham stumbles through the dark woods looking for him for hours. By the time he finally finds the boy, he is unresponsive. So Graham crawls into the grave with him, takes the boy in his arms, and spends the night keeping him warm. In the end, his willingness to crawl into the hole with the boy, instead of yelling at him or rejecting him for digging it, changes the boy forever.

If you've ever had God crawl into the hole with you, you know why the boy was changed. God's love has the power to lift an addict up out of the gutter. God's love has the power to enable a grieving parent to keep breathing. God's love has the power to cast out fear, or at least keep it from becoming paralyzing, and to inspire everyone from social outcasts to tortured over-achievers to discover wholeness in God's grace. Nothing on earth is more powerful because God's willingness to be with us in darkness means that no person or situation is beyond redemption.

Luke conveyed how God's power would work by having shepherds show up first to see the Christ child. Notwithstanding the great shepherd imagery in Scripture, actual shepherds in Jesus' day were more often perceived as criminals and lowlifes than servants of the Lord. They lived on the fringes of society hand-to-mouth, vulnerable to the weather and the judgements of others. So in Luke's story, they got to see the baby first. After them, there would be others like them who were drawn to Jesus and his merciful love: prostitutes, lepers, blind people, grieving people, people who knew all too well what it was like to live in a hole. The vulnerable were drawn to Jesus because they needed him most. It was a fact that would later make some Romans speak of Christianity with disgust and outrage; they disdained the lower classes for their vulnerability as much as today's powers do. But the powerful did not survive, and the Gospel did.

"What can separate us from the love of God," Paul asked rhetorically in his letter to the Christians in Rome. "Will hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." We live in a time when there are many powers that threaten, powers we wish that God would stop. But even if that doesn't happen, the good news of the Gospel is that the power of God's love is always greater than human powers to destroy and control. Trust and believe that the child we welcome is not only with us in our trials, he has the desire and the power to transform all things for good. Thanks be to God. Amen.