



December 2018 Message for Congregations and Lay and Rostered Leaders

Dear Beloved of God –

We are taught by the morning newspaper headlines and by the evening news broadcasts to know names like: Donald Trump, Theresa May, Emmanuel Macron, Kim Jong-un, Vladimir Putin, Emperor Augustus, Quirinius - governor of Syria. Important people. Politicians, some of whom use power, who keep records - who announce that the world should be registered - and the entire world moves at their command - even the poor and the pregnant!

Rome reaches out its long arms to the little towns of Nazareth and Bethlehem and tightens its grip on its subjects through taxation and military might and population control – the empire-building business!

But the name Augustus meant more than just an inconvenient government decree for an imperial document carved forever in marble heralded the birth-day of Augustus as the birth-day of a god! Set in stone, this declaration announced the birth of Augustus as good news to the world! As emperor he was called *soter*, which means, “savior.” He was: “god on earth in human form, protector of the state, cause of peace and of blessing in the inhabited world!” His laws were presented in official propaganda as, “good tidings of great joy.”

The official party-line proclaimed that if you want to see deity at work look to the Emperor, savior, god, the rising star, the bringer of peace, the one who brings “good tidings of great joy!” And yet, what the record tells is of organized violence, militarism and exploitation of the poor. Of an emperor - a savior - who killed three of his sons and one of his wives, and a number of close advisors because he feared their disloyalty.

This is how the Christmas gospel begins - with a word of power - a decree - with powerful, important people in the powerhouse cities of Rome and Jerusalem. But the gospel writer doesn't stop there instead the writer tells of a bunch of politically powerful nobodies - like Joseph and Mary from the backward town of Nazareth - in a stable, in a dot-on-the-map-town called Bethlehem, surrounded by a group of scraggy low-life shepherds who lived in the fields and who, likely as not, smelled to high heaven!

The gospel writer invites us to listen carefully and to look closely as the stone-cut declaration about Emperor Augustus is countered with another word - this one delivered by heavenly messenger rather than Roman decree.

This gospel writer, you see, is busy re-arranging and contrasting our ideas about power, about history, about good news of great joy - in this child lying in a manger - heard against the backdrop of empire builders, power brokers and census takers.

To people suffering under unbelievable oppression, under the thumb of imperial Rome - Luke proclaims that they will hear and see truly good news not in imperial decrees, but in a manger -

in this “good news of great joy for all the people” - in a birth announcement which calls forth worship and adoration, amazement and awe, wide-eyed wonder and running feet - and hope.

If we are not stunned by this declaration, perhaps it is because we fail to see what God is up to for when God chooses to challenge the empire and the idolatry of imperial power God comes as a helpless infant; when God chooses to bring hope God comes not as a declaration cut into marble but as a babe wrapped in strips of cloth; and when God chooses to embrace us and all of humanity with the gift of love God comes not as a decree but in flesh.

This gospel writer invites us to ask the very real questions. The very real questions during the candle lighting and the gathering with family and friends, with strangers and friends; in the midst of our very real grief, and our very real concerns for our family and friends and for this world: who saves and who gives peace? And who claims our ultimate loyalty? And who is it that brings good news of great joy?

Come to Bethlehem and see
Him whose birth the angels sing
Come, adore on bended knee
Christ the Lord, the newborn king.

In Christ Jesus –
Shalom,
+Bishop Larry Kochendorfer

“The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 15:13)