

Christmas Eve 2009

Text: Luke 2:1-20

Title: Rome and Bethlehem

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Rome was the center of the universe, the center of the civilized world. Rome was the seat of power- the place of Caesar and the Senate. Rome controlled the world from Spain to India, from England to Africa. When Rome spoke the whole world listened.

When Caesar said go, you went, because Caesar had the armies to back him up. When Caesar said, pay your taxes, you did. Rome and Caesar- that's where the power was.

And so that's where our story begins. Caesar Augustus issues a decree and that decree must be obeyed. Everyone must go. No excuses. Not even if your wife is nine months pregnant.

So Mary and Joseph went. What choice did they have?

For them, a the decree of Caesar meant a trip south, back to Joseph's ancestral home in Bethlehem. But none of Joseph's uncles or cousins have a room to spare (and they had probably heard the rumors that Mary had gotten pregnant before the wedding), and so the only place available is out in the barn (it might have been a cave), out with the animals.

Our story takes us from the halls of power in Rome to a stable in Bethlehem, from the largest, most powerful city in the world, to the smallest, most insignificant of all places, a barn in a sleepy little sheep town.

Our story takes us from Caesar Augustus, the most powerful man in the world, to a newborn baby lying in a feed-trough.

The contrast is striking. Luke takes us from the most powerful and influential people and places to the most lowly and insignificant.

But this is where our story continues. This is where the all the important things are happening. This is where heaven comes to earth.

Here, in the hill country and the fields around Bethlehem we have the shepherds, the minimum wage workers. If these shepherds lived in Oak Lawn today, they would be the teenage boys bagging your groceries, bussing your table or flipping your burgers.

And yet this is where the angel of the Lord chooses to come. Not to Rome and to Caesar and his generals, but to Bethlehem, at night, in the fields with the shepherds.

They are the first to hear the good news that a Savior has been born. They are the first to be invited to see the baby. They are the first to spread the news about what they have seen and heard.

That is the story of Christmas. That Jesus is born in Bethlehem, not Rome. He is the son of a carpenter, not Caesar. His guests are shepherds, not senators.

But this is where the action is. This is where the angels come. This is heaven on earth.

And so it is for us tonight. We are a small gathering of less than 100 people. Most people in the United States have never even heard of Oak Lawn. Most people in Oak Lawn, probably haven't even heard of this church. Hundreds of people drive past every day without even giving this church a second look. People are driving past right now without a clue as to what is going on here.

Our service tonight will not be at the top of the headlines on tomorrow's paper. It will be over in about an hour and then quickly forgotten.

This is not Rome. This is not Washington, DC or New York City. Chicago wasn't even good enough to get the Olympics. People are paying more attention to what happens in Congress and the White House today with the health care bill, that to what happens in this tiny church in one of the many suburban villages in the Midwest.

There are no senators or generals or CEOs here tonight. Just truck drivers and secretaries and nurses and carpenters and engineers, the students, and the retirees and the unemployed.

This may not be Rome. But this is Bethlehem. And that's a good thing. Because Bethlehem is where the action is.

Bethlehem is where our Savior, Christ the Lord, is born.

Jesus is not on the Senator floor debating bills and making laws. Jesus is not on Wall Street making a fortune on the market.

Jesus is here, in a small church tucked away in a suburban neighborhood.

Jesus is here in this place.

The manger is not the wooden box out in front of the church or in the narthex. The manger is here in the form of the altar.

The swaddling cloths that enfold our Lord are linens on the altar, which cover His body and His blood.

The angels are here, too, singing their song of peace on earth and goodwill towards men, and we get to sing along.

Just as the shepherds were invited to the manger, you are invited to the altar, to kneel and to worship and adore your Lord and Savior.

Just as the shepherds left rejoicing and praising God, so you too leave this place praising the Lord who has come to you this day.

The Lord chose to come to Bethlehem and He chooses to come here.

You will meet those who will say, can't I find God somewhere else? Can't I find Him in the beauty of a sunset or in the peace of my own home? Can't I find Him in other religions or philosophies or in the goodness of mankind?

The answer is no.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem and was found there in the manger. The angel didn't say to the shepherds- go home and find God in your own way. The angel sent the shepherds to Bethlehem to find Jesus there in the manger.

Jesus is here for you on the altar in the bread and the wine. Jesus says, "This is my body, this is my blood. Do this for my remembrance." Jesus says that as disciples are made through baptizing and teaching, He will be with us always. Jesus says that where two or three are gathered in His Name, He is here in our midst.

Jesus is here when we are gathered in His name, when we baptize and teach, when we receive His body and blood. That makes this Bethlehem, and the place to worship.

The joy of Christmas is not that Jesus was born in a far off place a long, long time ago.

The joy of Christmas is that Jesus is here tonight, on this very altar, and that we are invited to come and see for ourselves, to worship our Savior and to return rejoicing.