

Christmas 2018
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The context of Jesus' birth is reflected in the details we receive from St. Luke. He makes it abundantly clear- heavenly power has arrived to challenge earthly power. It will not be a battle royal. No, God ushers in his kingdom without weapons or threats that an empire might use to flex its muscle and bend people to its will. The Kingdom of God will be working against the Roman Empire; that much is true, but it will happen without an earthly arsenal. In God's kingdom, no person will be compelled to go along to get along. God's power will be on display through human weakness, frailty, and vulnerability.

When royalty was born in those days, runners would be sent throughout the realm to announce glad tidings of the royal birth. It would have been an occasion of great ceremony. Such an occasion would reflect the stature and power of the "Roman ruler, whom the imperial cult celebrated as the son of god and savior of the whole world, the bringer of peace and good news" (*Synthesis*, 12/25/18, p. 1). Contrast a Roman announcement with the heavenly proclamation, given not to those of high degree but instead to the lowliest caste, shepherds. It's hard to convey how far outside of power they stood, but trust me, in Roman eyes, these were insignificant people, but not for God. No God goes to them first.

The shepherds receive word of the birth through the annunciation of the angel, "Do not be afraid; for see- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11). After making their way to Bethlehem and seeing the heavenly sign of the child wrapped in swaddling clothes, "the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them" (Luke 2:20).

A sentimental reading of the text would only allow such conditions to be hallmarks of the past, but we know better. Today's context of proclamation, "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (2:11), is every bit as subversive as it was in the age of Caesar Augustus. The names have changed, but people still climb over one another in pursuit of wealth, prestige, and power.

That the Holy Family became refugees from those who would do them harm is well-documented in the Gospel of Matthew. The flight of the Holy Family to Egypt shows the real-life consequences of over-reliance on sheer power, military might, and coercion to bend others to our will. Today throughout the world refugee children remain vulnerable. In the Holy Land, the last remaining shepherds, the Bedouin, have no power to challenge those who would take their land. In China, Christians are locked up for doing what you and I are doing right now, proclaiming our allegiance to something other than the state. Jesus is Lord, not Caesar, not the party, or anything else that we would idolize. So corrupting is the pursuit of worldly power and wealth that church authorities would seek to hide crimes against vulnerable children entrusted to their care. That child sex abuse cover-up places them on the wrong side. Such actions scream, "Caesar is Lord", when their call is to proclaim "Jesus is Lord".

“Lillian Trasher was born in 1887 in Brunswick, Georgia. As a young woman she worked at an orphanage, not knowing at the time that her life’s work would be devoted to caring for abandoned children.

In 1909, while engaged to a man she loved deeply, she heard the testimony of a missionary from India, and she was aware at that moment that she could not be married. God had called her to service as a missionary. Not knowing where she would go, she opened her Bible and read Acts 7:34, “I have seen, I have seen the affliction of my people which is in Egypt, and I have heard their groaning and am come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send thee to Egypt.”

In 1910 she arrived in Alexandria, Egypt, with her sister Jenny, and they found their way to the village of Asyut near the Nile. Shortly after arriving, Lillian was called to the bedside of a dying mother whose malnourished daughter was near death. Though ordered by the mission directors to return the child to the village, Lillian refused to abandon her to poverty and certain death. In 1911 she rented a small house and some furniture and nursed the child back to health.

As she took additional children, she had to rely on charity...In 1916 she was able to purchase additional land...When she died in 1961, she had become known as the ‘Mother of the Nile’ and had cared for 25,000 Egyptian children. Her orphanage remains open today. (Holy Women, Holy Men, p. 126).

If that missionary had proclaimed Caesar is Lord instead of Jesus as Lord, those vulnerable children might not have been shown the love of God.

It’s not enough for us to sing these beautiful hymns, admire the gorgeous flowers and altar décor, or even say with firmness that Jesus is Lord. No, the miraculous Christmas story is only complete when we take action, not with might or coercion but by following God’s example to love through human weakness, frailty, and vulnerability.

The world never grows tired of trying to do it *our* way. When will we learn? Empires rise as others fade, but God’s kingdom endures forever. The church isn’t perfect by any stretch, but it endures because the faithful will from time-to-time dare return to Bethlehem; to re-learn God’s ways before going out to herald the message of divine love through word and deed. *Amen.*