

Why did Mary go to Bethlehem? She didn't have to. Hope and fear, is the answer. "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered." But women didn't count, and Mary didn't have to go. Joseph had to go, to his family's hometown. Caesar Augustus (previously called Octavian) had issued the edict to count everyone, in order that he could tax the people of the Empire. He was known for being exact about finances and accounting. So this was about money, and keeping order.

And it was about hope and fear. Take Augustus, for example. On the one hand Rome, its citizens and its subjects were hopeful. Augustus had ended 100 years of civil war, brought peace and prosperity back to the Empire, rebuilt the city and reopened temples of worship, and restored public discourse. It was said of him that he found Rome brick and left it marble. Hopeful.

On the other hand, there was always fear when Rome was involved, if you were subject people. Israel was an occupied nation, fairly heavily garrisoned. And Augustus was like Mussolini, in some ways, who made the trains run on time but was dictatorial. The taxation system was graft-riddled and everyone up the power structure got their cut. Politics and intrigue and patronage made public life a dangerous undertaking. Fear.

So Joseph had to go, and on the surface it wouldn't make sense to take Mary, pregnant as she was, out on the highways known for robbers and dangers, *unless...* it was not safe to leave her at home. It seems likely they were afraid to leave her with her own people, judgmental and religiously narrow as the evidence would seem to indicate. Pregnant out of wedlock, and the first century version of Focus on the Family just raving dangerous enough to where Joseph had to take her with him to Bethlehem.

Luke, in telling this story to us, is very intentional about placing it in the historical context. This all happens in real life, the ordinary, the day to day with all its attendant hopes and fears. This is not "Once upon a time" or "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away..." It was during "the first registration...while Quirinius was governor of Syria." The time was particular, the place was particular, and Jesus is born into a time in history, a culture, a people, a place.

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "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 the Messiah, the Lord."

The contrast Luke is making here is between two Lords, both of whom seem to hold out hope and the promise of peace. One is wealthy and powerful and owns the world or seems to. Augustus. And the other newborn and frail, born into a family and a condition lacking propriety. Jesus, Emmanuel. One is collecting taxes, and the other is poor and wrapped in simple swaddling cloths. One commands the legions of state and the other is visited by shepherds. One exercises power by taking, the other by giving, as God emptied God's own self of power to become one of us.

Augustus' relative benevolence won't last. He will die in 14 a.d., and a reign of terror will leave crosses and violence on the hillside of Judea. On the other hand, scant years before, is it really accident that the Messiah-the Bread of Heaven- is laid in a manger, that trough animals feed from (even *if* Joseph cleaned it out!)?

What must have gone on with this couple, Joseph and Mary? They had both heard the promise of angels that held out the hope of the coming Messiah, and their role in it. And yet they are threatened by the omnipresent power of Rome and the omnipresent pettiness of a religion grown small and mean. When hope and fear collide in the heart, how do you hold both those things inside you at once?

We do fear, don't we? Some of our fears and dreads are reasonable, even a safety mechanism. But fear isn't such a good thing when it is the motivation for how we live in the world. How much of our politics is driven by fear? How much religion relies on it for control? We fear for our financial future, we fear for our children, we may or may not fear aging and death but it appears that the culture does.

Those fears have correspondingly powerful hopes. Occasionally the hope meets the fear, matches up to it, overcomes it. We live in hope, that God will hold our future safe and secure. We fear that Birmingham will decline, losing more from its schools and being a high-crime city; and we see the changes in downtown and in the economy and we hope.

Mary had fear, certainly. Joseph feared for her. When the heavenly host appeared on the hill above the shepherds they were terrified. And God's comforting word is always "fear not." We said in our Adult Advent Study this year that doubt is not the opposite of faith, fear is. And there is fear enough in the world to go around, with good reason. Yet, Christ Jesus comes to us in the most precarious way, as if to assure us that God could love us into wholeness with one hand tied behind his back. I sure hope so.

Faith is hoping and trusting in God, without guarantees and sometimes despite evidence to the contrary. Fear not! I bring you glad tidings of great joy. God so loved the world as to become human and live with us. What harbinger of our fears, what calamity, what power, what turn of circumstance, can give answer to that? The Apostle Paul promised that there was nothing, nothing in all creation that could separate us from the love of God in Christ.

Here is the Good News for Christmas Eve – our fears have been matched with a hope that can satisfy them, the hope of the world. Unto you...unto you... unto you.... Is born this day in the City of David, a Savior, Christ the Lord.

Into history and culture and people. God comes to all times and places with the promise of the Savior. In this one, this particular born person, this child, is the hope of the world. Birmingham, Birmingham. In thy dark streets, *too*, shines the everlasting light. It is the light of Christ Jesus, and in him the hopes and fears of all the years are met.