

Augustus vs. Jesus

Luke 2:8-20

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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Sunday after Christmas

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

*¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (NRSV)

I

As followers of Jesus, there is one great sociological fact that we must deal with. It's this: we live in the world's richest, most powerful country. It doesn't matter whether we like it or not. It doesn't matter whether we're glad about it or sad about it. It's a fact of life.

The United States of America has a bigger, more powerful military than any other. It has about 1.3 million troops on active duty, with another 865,000 in reserve. It has over 13,000 aircraft and 275 large ships and submarines. As if this were not enough, the U.S. also has 6,550 nuclear weapons.

Furthermore, the U.S. has a global reach unlike any other nation, with about 200,000 troops deployed in more than 170 countries. There are 195 countries in the world, which means that only 25 countries around the world, or 13% of the world's nations, do *not* have any U.S. troops. To pay for all this, the U.S. spends \$596 billion a year, which is more than the next 7 countries *combined*.¹

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/03/22/us/is-americas-military-big-enough.html>. Some additional data from <https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength->

Given these numbers, we would be allowed to call the United States of America a empire with global reach, global power, and global influence. What does it mean for us, the followers of Jesus, to live in such a country?

II

In the first century, the followers of Jesus also had one great sociological fact to deal with. It was this: they too lived in what was then the richest, most powerful empire. It didn't matter whether they liked it or not. It didn't matter whether they were glad about it or sad about it. It was a fact of life.

When Jesus was born—and for several centuries afterward—the Roman Empire had a larger, more powerful army than any other country. In about 31 BCE, Emperor Augustus created for the first time in Roman history a permanent and professional army with a central command. This army, divided in legions, numbered about 300,000 men. It wasn't just the size of the Roman army that made it so effective. The Roman army also had discipline, organization, and cutting edge weapons that allowed Emperor Augustus to maintain a huge empire.²

The books of the New Testament were written within a period of about 75 years. During those 75 years—and for many years afterward—the tiny Christian church had to figure out how to follow Jesus while living in the huge, ever-present Roman Empire, with its gods and goddesses, its language and literature, its buildings and statues, its coins and culture—and yes, its military. If you want to follow Jesus, then how does the life of Jesus affect the way you live in this empire?

III

This was one of core questions on Luke's mind when he wrote his gospel. You can see this already at the beginning of chapter 2, where Luke writes these words: "In those

detail.asp?country_id=united-states-of-america, from <http://www.worldometers.info/geography/how-many-countries-are-there-in-the-world/>, and from <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Nuclearweaponswhohaswhat>. All accessed on November 30, 2018.
²² https://www.ancient.eu/Roman_Warfare/

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” (vs. 1-2). With these words, Luke is asking us to hear the story of Jesus’ birth in the context of first century Roman realities. He wants us to ask: What does it mean that Jesus was born in the proud, callous, and violent Roman Empire?

It turns out that Luke sprinkles at least six clues in verses 8-20 that help us to answer this question.

The first three clues are in verse 11: “to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” In this short verse, the angel gives Jesus three titles: *Savior*, *Messiah*, and *Lord*. The first title is *Savior*, or in Greek, *sōter*. For people in the Roman Empire, that word *sōter* was heavy with meaning, because that was one of the main titles for Emperor Augustus. In flowery public speeches, and on coins and inscriptions, the Roman propaganda machine frequently called Augustus a *sōter*, a savior.

No, says the angel to the shepherds, your savior is not Emperor Augustus who lives in far away city of Rome. Your true savior is Jesus, born just a mile or two from here in the tiny town of Bethlehem.

The second title the angel uses is *Messiah*, which means “the anointed one.” In Jewish thought, people anointed with oil were fingered by God to take up some key leadership role. Saul, the first king of Israel, was anointed, as was David, the second king who came after him. As an anointed one, Jesus too is fingered by God for a key leadership position.

So, the angel announces, your real king is Jesus, the anointed one who stands in the lineage of the Jewish kings of old.

The third title the angel uses for Jesus is *Lord*, or in Greek, *kyrios*. Again in a Roman context, *Lord*, or *kyrios* was a word you used to address people with more social status than you. Slaves called their masters *lord*. Wives sometimes call their husbands *lord*. Roman citizens called Roman senators *lord*. And in the empire, the biggest *lord* of all was Emperor Augustus himself.

Nope, says the angel, not so. Your real Lord lies in a manger the next town over.

The fourth clue Luke gives us comes in verse 13, with that word *host*, as in “a multitude of the heavenly host.” In Greek, that word *host* is *stratia*, and in normal conversation, *stratia* had only one meaning. It was a military word which meant *army*. So perhaps a better way to translate verse 13 is, “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly army. . . .” The word *multitude* suggests something huge, grand, maybe even something so numerous you can’t count it.

The implication? It’s as though Luke is saying to us: You think the Roman army is huge? Ha! You really ought to see the heavenly army of God’s angels, vast, glorious, and all of them dedicated to the service of God.

The fifth clue is found in verse 14: “Glory to God in the highest heaven.” Glory and praise is what the Roman propaganda mill turned out for the emperor. Look beyond the rhetoric of Rome, Luke says to his fellow followers of Jesus. Give glory and praise not to the emperor, but to God. Give glory and praise not to the kingdom of Rome, but to the kingdom created, sustained, and deployed by God.

The sixth clue is also in verse 14: “and on earth peace among those God favors.” In the Roman Empire at that time, Emperor Augustus was heralded as the bringer of peace.³ In a sense, he did bring peace. Before Augustus, there had been a long and nasty civil war, on both land and sea, with Romans fighting against Romans. Augustus brought an end to that, and people in the empire were understandably grateful.

But the angels proclaim otherwise. Real peace can only come as a gift and a promise from God. Real peace flows from the God of heaven and earth, not from the tip of a spear, or the blade of a sword, or the runway of an aircraft carrier. We don’t trust the emperor for peace, we trust God for peace.

With these six word clues, Luke equips first century Christians to resist the propaganda of the empire. Look not to Augustus, but to Jesus, who is true Savior, authentic Messiah, worthy Lord. Don’t assume those Roman legions are the ultimate in what is possible, because God’s angels outrank them.

³ Mikeal Parsons, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 50-53.

IV

There is one important feature of this story that remains for us to wonder about. Why the shepherds? Why did God's angels tell all this stuff to shepherds?

Here again, we find that Luke upends things and offers the Christian church a different way of looking at reality. In Greco-Roman culture, people looked down their noses at shepherds. Shepherds were uneducated. They lived with sheep and therefore they smelled like sheep and got dirty like sheep. Shepherds were rascals and you'd better not trust them.

But this was not true in Jewish culture, where shepherds were thought of as honorable people.⁴ Shepherds symbolized the soul of Jewish religious identity. After all, Abraham and Sarah were shepherds, as were Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Esau and thousands upon thousands of their descendants. David, the king who endlessly fascinated Jewish people, had started out as a boy shepherd. Then too, David had presumably written that most famous of Psalms, the 23rd, which begins with those memorable words, "The Lord is my shepherd." As if all this were not enough, sheep were also essential components of the worship life in the Jerusalem Temple.

In other words, the angels are assuring the shepherds, who represent the heart and soul of Judeo-Christian identity, that God cares deeply about them. Your savior is here. Your Lord is born. Your peace is assured. Fear not, for all shall be well.

V

Given the one great fact of trying to live as followers of Jesus in a violent empire, Luke directs our eyes elsewhere. He urges us to behold another reality which is really real. This other reality does not depend on aircraft carriers or fighter jets. Behold Jesus, not just the baby, but the fully grown adult who came to live in history so that we can see beyond history.

⁴ Sarah Harris, "Why Are There Shepherds in the Lukan Birth Narrative?" *Colloquium* 44/1 (2012), 17-30.