

Lucky or Lowly



NATIVITY OF OUR LORD
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Luke 2:1-20

The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, *"You must understand this, that in the last days distressing times will come. For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, unfeeling..."* Phew, he goes on and on. I'll spare you the rest. It's not exactly the warm fluffy kind of message to begin a Christmas Eve message. But it may be the way some of us experience our world today.

The lucky ones, those who are the elite, wealthy, and entitled have the power, status, and influence to shape our world. They often encompass political leaders, ultra-rich business figures, media moguls, and cultural icons. And then we have the lowly ones. They tend to be humble, meek, unassuming. They are your everyday folk who strive to eke out a living.

There seems to be a malaise, a negativity, or darkness in the world on the part of those who are less fortunate than the wealthy, powerful, and privileged who prey upon them. We all hear of numerous, unspeakable, unjust things happening at the hands of the elite. And we wonder *"Where is God in the ordeals of the lowly?"*

The prophet Isaiah spoke to people in a similar darkness. Centuries earlier, the prophet expressed his heaviness and dismay as he looked upon the oppressive reign of King Ahaz and the failures of Judah's leadership. Isaiah describes a time of internal political strife and foreign threats—a house divided against itself. In response to the uncertainty and upheaval of the times, the people sought guidance and hope from the occult rather than their God. Isaiah declared that this lapse of faith would only lead to greater darkness, distress, and anguish. But Isaiah also brought hope to his followers saying, *"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. For unto us a child is born, unto us a son given; and the government shall be upon his shoulders. And his name shall be called: Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace."* Most of us are familiar with these words Handel used in his great work, *The Messiah*. The good news Isaiah brings is that this child was not just born for us; this Son was given to us. This Son, given to us, expresses the depth of God's love for us. What kind of love is this? It is the kind of love that is limitless. God's love extends to everyone, regardless

of age, gender, or ethnicity. God's love is for the lucky and unlucky; the lowly and the powerless. Jesus' earthly life models the creation of a community of the desperate--persons hungry and desperate for God whom God can then transform and deploy back into the world to love and serve others. Luke's birth narrative provides for us the earliest hints that this will in fact be the focus of Jesus' ministry and should be the focus of our own lives as followers of Jesus.

Our scripture lesson is so familiar that it is easy to miss its subtle and subversive message. The text recounts the Christmas story of a census at the behest of the emperor, Caesar Augustus; the journey of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem; Jesus' birth in a manger; and the arrival of angels and shepherds to celebrate the event. Yet, it is in these well-known details, that the true power of the story is found. For in them, we find God's intention to create a community of the desperate through whom God will reach out in love to the world. Luke skillfully opens his report of Jesus' birth by setting it in a specific time and space. The reference to Caesar Augustus serves as much more than a chronological marker. Rather, it sets up a conflict between two kings and two kingdoms. Caesar Augustus was one of the greatest, if not the greatest, of all emperors who ever reigned over Rome. He bore all the rights and prerogatives of power and influence. His reach extended to the small, insignificant province of Judea. And it is here our scripture lesson opens with a trip by Joseph and Mary from the town of Nazareth to their ancestral city of Bethlehem to register according to a decree from Augustus. While in Bethlehem, Mary goes into labor and gives birth to her son and lays him in a manger because there was no room in the guest room. A king is born that night in Bethlehem, but this King will lay aside all the trappings of power and live his life armed only with faith, hope and love. Furthermore, Jesus' humble birth emphasizes God's care for the lowly. The King of kings and Lord of lords is not born into wealth or power. He was not found in Rome. Rather, he lay asleep in a manger. What kind of king is this? If Jesus were born today, where would we find him?

The scene shifts to the regions around Bethlehem in which shepherds were out with their flocks. Shepherds in Jesus' day were not numbered among the rich or powerful. They were lowly peasants to whom Jesus' birth is first announced. God doesn't come looking for the lucky ones--the proud, the important, or the powerful. He comes to those in need, those desperate for a life that is lived for God, those desiring better lives, lived for a value greater than their own good. The shepherds were terrified at the appearance of an angel, but their terror soon turned to awe, wonder and joy at the announcement. The angel tells the shepherds to rejoice because of the good news of Jesus' birth. He will be a source of joy *"for all the people."* Jesus' birth and the salvation will reach and touch everyone! His birthplace is *"the city of David as foretold."* The angel also gives titles to the child: Savior, Messiah, and Lord. *"Savior"* was a title worn by the Roman Emperor, but Luke boldly declares that Jesus is the savior. What an audacious and surprising claim! In this distant corner of Roman influence is born one much greater than even Caesar Augustus. Yet, he does not bear the trappings of his rank -- the baby Jesus identifies with the weak and lowly. *"Messiah"* implies that Jesus is Israel's long awaited Davidic king and deliverer. *"Lord"* is the title used typically of God. By declaring Jesus as *"Lord,"* the angels claim that Jesus is the one in whom God is working to bring forth salvation. Next, "a multitude of the heavenly host" begin to worship and praise God. They speak of peace on earth among those whom God favors. These words carry a powerful message. *"Glory to God in the highest heaven."* God is worthy of honor and acclamation for his work. In addition, the *"peace"* this child brings is available for all of humanity, those most in need of God. This peace of God refers to God's desire for justice, restoration, hope and wholeness.

Think about who received this message: lowly shepherds out in the field. Yet, these were precisely the persons whom Jesus came to save. Whom does God favor? Those lucky enough to be born into wealth? Or those who are born to the lowly? The contrast between the powerful and lowly continues here. The announcement of the birth of Jesus by the angels does not occur in the presence of the Roman power brokers, business tycoons or other influential elites. The announcement of Jesus' birth came to the community of the desperate. But God's work does not stop with a mere announcement. The announcement becomes a *mission*. How do the shepherds respond to the birth announcement and the worship of the angels? An experience of God's grace is never an end in itself. If it is authentically from God, it will *always* push us outside of ourselves and point to others. And so, the lowly shepherds become this new king's first ambassadors. They head directly for Bethlehem to see things for themselves. The authentication of the events with their own eyes motivates them to proclaim the words of the angels to those who are present. This leads to amazement by "all who heard it." Perhaps the "all" refers to those staying in the actual guest room that night. Mary, who already knows the truth about Jesus, simply reflects on the wondrous events around the birth of her son, Jesus. The shepherds then return to their flocks worshipping and praising God. Their actions are important. They receive the good news about Jesus, and they are transformed from lowly shepherds to heralds and ambassadors of God's good news.

This is the Gospel message the prophet Isaiah once foretold. A prophet who lived in turbulent times, under the oppression of King Ahaz and the threat of the Assyrian army. Jesus was also born into difficult times, marked by political tension, Roman authority, heavy taxation, and cultural shifts. And we, too, are living in challenging times where there is political division and instability, rapid technological change, and economic inequity. The Gospel for us today is the call to be transformed by the message that God came to us as a little child. He taught us to live selflessly, kindly, humbly, honestly, and generously. God's love is for all people whether lucky or lowly. For it is God who empowers us with his grace and grants us hope, power, and ability to transform our world. The gift of the Holy Spirit enables and inspires us to live with empathy, grace, and care

for all of God's good creation. And, the witness of Jesus 'birth is that we can become the source of hope for the world. Christmas calls us to be beacons of light and hope that shines and illuminates the darkness of our world.

In Jesus name, amen.