

“Luke: A Subversive Conception”
by Rev. David J. Wood
3rd Sunday of Advent: December 14, 2025
First Congregational Church Camden, Maine

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born[c] will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.”

Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

Luke 1: 46-55

And Mary said,
“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant.
Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name;
indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.
He has come to the aid of his child Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

~~~~~

In the 20th year before Jesus was born, Emperor Augustus erected a monument in the center of Rome: the Milliarium Aureum (The Golden Milestone). The remnant of this monument can be seen today in the ruins of the Roman Forum in Rome. All roads were considered to begin at this monument and lead to this milestone. It was, literally and figuratively, the epicenter, ground zero of the Roman Empire.

It's where that familiar phrase, "All roads lead to Rome," originated. This past week the New York Times reported that researchers have just published an updated digital atlas of the highways and byways of Ancient Rome in the 1st Century. It was originally thought that there were about 120,000 miles of roads. The updated figure now stands at 187,460 miles! That's impressive...even by modern standards. Think about it: the road from Portland, Maine to Portland, Oregon is about 3,200 miles.

Luke tells us that God took a different road in a different direction than Rome.

"In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God" – NOT TO ROME – but "to a town in Galilee called Nazareth". Not to the Emperor, but "to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David."

The Angel of God had a message for Mary:

"You will bear a son and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Even though, this morning, we did not read the part of the story that comes in Luke chapter 2, you know it well. You recall that, there, Luke tells us, that it was none other than Emperor Augustus who "sent out a decree that all the world should be registered...". It was THAT decree that forced Joseph and Mary to make their way from Nazareth in Galilee to Joseph's hometown of Bethlehem.

~~~~~

It's worth taking a few minutes to bring into focus the significance of Luke's inclusion of Emperor Augustus. In that day, no one embodied absolute power more than Augustus – he who was known as a "god" and hailed as the "bearer and maker of peace for the whole world."

It was Emperor Augustus who ushered in the era we call "The Pax Romana" The Roman Peace. Historians mark the Pax Romana from the 27th Year before the birth of Christ to the year 180 after the birth of Christ. A span of more than 200 years. That's a long time. Next year will mark only our 250th year as a country.

In 9th year before the birth of Jesus, a new altar named, the Ara Pacis Augustae – the Altar of Augustan Peace. The dedication of that Altar coincided with a decree declaring that the birthday of Augustus, Sept. 23 would be the first day of the New Year. Referring to Augustus, the inscription read: "The birthday of our God signaled the beginning of good news for the world." (I guess history of ego-maniacal leaders is a long one!) This, Luke wants us to realize, is the setting for the birth of Jesus, the one who was to be called "the Son of the Most High."

If we had been there, in those days, amidst the decrees from the mighty Augustus, there would have been no question in anybody's mind who held and wielded power over the world of that day and, one would reasonably have assumed, over many days to come!

But there, in the backroads of rural, Roman Occupied Palestine, a different story was unfolding. It could be heard in the exultant song of a young girl caught up in with a very different take on the world:

My soul magnifies the Lord...my spirit rejoices in God my savior...for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant

She sees the presence of God in the midst of her circumstance...and the circumstance of her people.

She marvels at what God has done...not simply at what she perceives that God has done for her...but what God has done in the past for her people, "from generation to generation"...and how the purposes of God have and will work their way out in the life of her people in the generations to come:

*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly...*

*He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty....*

It is this vision that would, in time, be instilled in the Son she bore in her womb...he would, in time, Luke tells us, echo her vision. Luke records it for us in chapter 6 of his Gospel:

*Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God...
blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled
Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh....*

*Woe to you who are rich...for you have received your consolation..
Woe to you who are full now...for you will be hungry...*

It is a song that echos out across the ages....it does not die..it is born again and again throughout history....it is not an abstraction ...not simply an idea or an ideal...it always takes on flesh in actual deeds born of HOPE...and it weaves its way into real times and places...

She was not the first ...she would not be the last...there is a force for mercy, for justice in the world that will work its way out...there is a goodness and light that will outlast and overcome every darkness...

~~~~~

One more note on the Ara Pacis...the Altar of Peace of the great Emperor Augustus: it was quite literally lost to memory – buried under some 20 feet of silt. Some fragments of it were discovered in the 17th Century and more in the early 20th Century.

It wasn't until the late 1930's, in the years leading up to WWII, that the altar was actually reconstructed at the direction of another "powerful" leader of his day: the fascist dictator, Benito Mussolini. Mussolini had come to identify himself with the greatness of Emperor Augustus saw himself as the one who would restore the Italian Empire to all its former glory. All roads would once again lead to Rome! I think we could name his effort as the attempt to resurrect Emperor Augustus.

I think we all know how that turned out.

In the wake of the unquestioned power and greatness of Emperor Augustus...the movement of a couple among those being herded by his capricious decrees would have been utterly unworthy of notice...unremarkable...two ordinary people following orders...searching desperately for a place to spend the night with only lowly shepherds paying attention to their whereabouts.

And yet, here we are, some 2,000 years later, not marveling at the enduring greatness and power of the Emperor. Instead we are talking about Emperor Augustus because he is part of the story of Mary and Joseph and the child that was to be born to them.

We live in a political climate that has many feeling anxious, even afraid. There is much stirring and unsettledness. Remember, this story we tell, which, – even in its very beginning – calls us to an understanding of power that is beyond politics and that gives us a basis for hope.

I read somewhere this week a definition of "radical hope": "a non-despairing openness to a still unimagined new future whose precise contours we cannot foresee." It is that hope that is our antidote to fatalism and despair and provides the counter to a mood of resignation.

It is that hope that stirs in us an "irreverence towards today's common sense." I love that phrase. I think Luke wants us to see Mary as the embodiment of that kind of hope and the irreverence that it inspires.

Mary exemplifies a capacity for receptivity. In the face of the impossible, she responds, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word."

Receptivity is the capacity to be moved...to be gripped by something beyond us that calls us out in involvement with things that matter...it is what empowers us to make commitments to care and to sustain those commitments even amid fragility and uncertainty.

If we lose that capacity for receptivity when we lose our capacity to care...we become numb and unresponsive.

Luke presents Mary as the model for us...she was the model Disciple. She is the only character who was there before the beginning...and she was there, on the Day of Pentecost, gathered with the Disciples – the day the Church was born.

Luke wrote not just his Gospel, but also the Book of Acts. Mary is the the through line...the one who embodies the receptivity through which God brings good news of great joy for all people.

~~~~~

An few years ago, I came across the writing Etty Hillesum...she was a young Jewish student living in Amsterdam in the 1930's and 40's...rounded up by the Nazis...and placed in a transit camp and eventually transported to Auschwitz where she died in 1943. She was 29 years old.

While she was in the transit camp she kept a diary during 1941 and 42...in the diary, in the midst of those horrific circumstances, she recounts her spiritual awakening and transformation. In the those tragic circumstances, she became a person of deep faith and devotion. She wrote the following...

"Everything is no longer pure chance....but an exciting adventure...I have the feeling that I have a destiny in which the events are strung significantly together....i have ceased living an accidental life...I have learned to speak the name of God without embarrassment...time and again it soars straight from my heart...I can't help it...the feeling that life is glorious and magnificent...."

Even as her freedom of movement was taken away, even when she was no longer free to roam the paths and the open country...she wrote, "yet I find life beautiful and I feel free. This sky within me is as wide as the one stretching above my head."

In her writing, I can hear the strains of an ancient song of another young Jewish woman:

"My soul magnifies the Lord
My spirit rejoices in God my savior."

When Etty Hillesum learned she and her companions were about to be transported from Holland to a camp in Poland.she wrote these words a part of a longer prayer.....

"You cannot help us...but we must defend your dwelling place inside us to the last."

What we know of her life and her writing, when she wrote of "defending God's dwelling place" – it was not about turning inward to protect herself. It was turning outward and giving herself to acts of compassionate caring for all those around her...the sick, the grieving, the dying.

I was so taken by her way of putting it in her prayer...."we must defend your dwelling place inside us to the last."

Perhaps that's what we are about whenever we gather here together..."defending God's dwelling place inside us"... for our sake and for the sake of the world. It is here, not only here, but certainly here, that we allow ourselves to become receptive to the call to hope... to find courage enough to care... it's what we are doing when we choose to forgive, to show mercy, reach out to someone in need, take the time to pray...we defend God's dwelling place inside us....God's dwelling place in this world...and in this time.

By God's grace, may it be so. Amen.