



Pastor Ken's Sermon

CHRISTMAS EVE MESSAGE

LUKE 2:1-20

DECEMBER 24, 2020

ONE DECREE, TWO DECREES...

"In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled." Of all the years to ponder the very first line of the Christmas story, this year may be the most opportune. Some versions use the word "taxed" in place of "enrollment", which is fine since that is what "enrollments" were eventually about. Caesar liked to count things – his people and their (rather his) money – historians tell us there were three such census' during his 40-year reign. 2020 could go down for us as the year of the "decree" – we've been subjected to many.

Unfortunately, we also have a natural aversion to being "decreed to." I have no waking memory (thank the Lord) of when I was 2 or 3 and a rather selective memory of when I was 13 so I cannot really say how obstinate I was toward my mother's guidance and loving recommendations. But having a first-hand account of three other 2, 3 and 13-year olds in my life, I'm fairly sure I was as unenthusiastic as they! So, when something as serious as we have endured this past year arises and caused us to be almost weekly on the receiving end of some sort of decree, interpretation of a decree, opinion about a decree, or a decree that supersedes a previous decree, you understand why *"a decree that went out from Caesar Augustus"* might not have put ancient folk in a particularly good mood either.

A decree is *"an order having the force of law."* When Jesus was born, Caesar Augustus was the most powerful man on earth – when Gaius Octavius Caesar Augustus talked...people listened. He could command people to leave home for years on end waiting till his minions had done a headcount and extracted a suitable tribute to the peace and prosperity he had won by force of will and legions of loyal soldiers. Caesar was an acclaimed *"a son god...a savior"* – what he'd accomplished was called *"good news"* to the Roman world.

Yet the world would little note nor long remember him if his enrollment decree had not brought about the fulfillment a 700-year-old prophesy of a Jew named Micah – *"but you Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are little among the clans of Judah, from you will come forth for me one who will be ruler over Israel - whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."* And so, under Caesar's decree, Joseph went up from Galilee...to Bethlehem...to be enrolled with Mary. But - while they were there this other "event" happened and thus another decree issued – not by a man who thought himself a god, but by God who condescended to become a man – and introduced a new concept to the world...the Servant King.

Two decrees entwined forever. Credit the second for making the first, and the name Caesar Augustus so memorable in the first place. I asked my Bible study participants the other day, how many studied Caesar Augustus in school. One hand went up - and it wasn't mine! To some Luke's reference to the census decree is for historical purposes and it does accomplish the task of placing our Lord's birth in history. His real point however is contrast not context...Luke's birth narrative introduces us to the real Savior of the World – the Son of the True God, the one whose grace and forgiveness is genuinely and lastingly Good News for all who believe it and receive Christ as their Lord.

So, a “decree went out that all the world should henceforth hear another version of good news.” That decree got the attention of shepherds – regarded only as the sort of folks Caesar liked to count yet who were accounted by God as worthy of being evangelists of a Gospel that brings peace to men and women for eternity. God’s decree got these men on the move too – but not in fear of punishment but exuberant joy. Under this decree people would not be taxed for the pleasure of a king but promised that the pleasure of a Servant King was forever upon them.

In this year of decrees, it’s tough to think highly of one. But remember we’re not so different from 1st century folks in Judea –who also lived betwixt and between them. You understandably might lament the information overload we’re subjected to these days - but imagine a world where your first hint of an invading army might be the dust they were kicking up as they approached your unguarded town, in which rich and poor alike had little in the way of a medicine chest and a hospital would have been unheard of. It is said Christmas comes best to those who know what it is like to fear and not be in control of every detail of life. The hopes and fears of all the years...most especially those of 2020, are met in this story tonight.

The Eastern Orthodox Church is noted for its’ use of icons – which are not mere paintings but canvassed confessions of the faith of the church. There is an icon of the Nativity of our Lord from the 4th century in the center of which is Christ lying in his feed box, but which is strikingly reminiscent a casket. Joseph, his earthly father, is pictured in the lower left corner well-away from the child, head in his hand in what appears a posture of resignation or despair.

The devil, a rare presence in icons, is in this one depicted as a little man covered in hair, who stands near Joseph pointing but not looking in the direction of the child (for of course he can’t) trying to convince Joseph that this baby is nothing extraordinary and nothing in the world is going to change on account of him. But Mary, though curiously depicted with her back turned to her child as well, is as a result looking intently at her despairing husband as though to convey to him what she conveys to all – her child will make things different – her child is her husband’s and our sure and certain hope.

In those days...two decrees went out...first from Caesar’s court ordering people to be numbered which was soon answered by one from the court of heaven, which numbers sinners like you and I among the good Lord’s chosen, forgiven, blessed people. On the night of our Lord’s birth to most anyone whom you would have asked, Caesar’s decree would have seemed like the only game in town. Now you and I... gladly...know better! Tonight, we do not receive a history lesson but a gift. Tonight, we are not resigned to whatever darkness the world would thrust upon us...and we do not despair. Christians rejoice because we live under the greatest decree of all – our Savior who is Christ the Lord has come to us, delights to have done so, and promises that we shall have him as ours...forever. AMEN