

It Was a Night Like This

Luke 2:1-20

December 24, 2020

Susan Boyer

We are celebrating a Christmas this year that is unlike any others in our lifetimes. No matter where you live and how you have previously celebrated Christmas, it looks different this year. Some have lost family members and so there is an emptiness that settles in the room. Some are spending Christmas alone with plans for Zoom connections. If we are seeing others it will be outside with masks. We took so much for granted for 2020. Think of all those years you woke up on Christmas morning unaware of what a huge gift it was to walk into that day filled with family, tastes, music, sights, joy. The traditions that were so much a part of our holidays feel somehow hollow in the reduced, socially distant Christmases we will celebrate this year.

There was a period of days when I simply couldn't talk about the fact that I would be alone on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Then with all the stalwart determination of my upbringing I decided that this year I would choose to pay attention to what I could learn and see in a Christmas that was stripped of all its usual trappings and hecticness. I have done some of that, ever so briefly, in the past...by choice not because the realities of our time demanded it. One year I asked a farmer friend if this city girl could come sit in his barn with the animals and just imagine Christ being born among the stench of manure and the itchiness of the straw. But, of course, when I got too cold, I just hurried home to my fireplace, Christmas tree and the warmth of my family.

The way the author of the Gospel Luke tells this story there were no presents, no family dinner, no Christmas carols, no Yule logs. Luke wants us to know it happened on a night in time when the Emperor was Augustus and Quirinius had been appointed the governor of Syria.

Caesar Augustus was said to have been divinely conceived by the god Apollo in the womb of his mother, Atia. In the Imperial Theology of his time, Augustus was called the "Son of God", "Savior" bringer of "Peace on Earth". Emperor Augustus had done quite a bit of political maneuvering of the years to ensure his place up against his rival Mark Antony. Movies have been made about the politics of this time.

Luke also mentioned Quirinius, governor of Syria whose first duty in his new role was to implement a census. A census was a tool of the Roman Empire used to show their strength in numbers and, of course, to secure more funds for the kingdom. These powerful men understood that the birth of a peasant produced another potential provider of service....and money. The Roman Empire loved a good census. But under Jewish counting Jews was forbidden. And so...the census that was taking place when Jesus was born triggered a revolt among some of the Jewish population, led by a man named Judas of Galilee. Out of this particular rebellion the political movement we know of as the Zealots was born.

Luke places the story of Jesus' birth in this historical framework because he wants us to know that Christ was born into a world shaped by Greco-Roman realities that placed heavy demands on its subjects. Mary and Joseph would have been taxed at least 50% to 60% of what they earned. Most people were subsistence farmers, growing one bag of food for themselves and one for the empire. We know that Joseph was a carpenter. This may have meant that he had lost his land and was in essence a downwardly mobile peasant. In the time when Jesus was born, the rich prospered and the poor suffered.

Mary and Joseph, according to Luke, had traveled to Bethlehem, to Joseph's ancestral home, to be counted in the census. They weren't part of the rebellion. They didn't appear to be any threat to the empire. When they arrived, the guest room was taken so they had to bed down in the area where the animals slept even though Mary was in labor. A baby comes when a baby comes. If there isn't any room, you find it.

While this little drama of the birth of another potential laborer is going on in Bethlehem, up on the hillside outside of town the low-wage essential workers were doing the dirty work of caring for the village's sheep at night. All of a sudden, an angel appeared to them with light emanating out in every direction. It was glorious. But if that wasn't enough, the first angel was joined by an army of angels. All this display and glory for the benefit of this band of forgotten and disenfranchised shepherds. The angel said, "Down there in the city David a most miraculous thing has happened on this very night. A savior, a Lord, a bringer of peace on Earth has been born. He is just a little peasant baby, wrapped in strips of cloth and sleeping in a feeding trough for a bed."

Friends, this story we gather to tell tonight and have told for centuries happened on a night and time like this one. A time of political maneuvering....a time of economic inequality when the rich prospered and the poor suffered....when low-wage essential workers on the night shift were forced to the edge of society and existed relatively unseen by those around them....a time of rebellion against the unequal treatment by the empire.

It was a night like this one when Christ was revealed to the world in the birth of a child, a child born in poverty. It was a night like this one when a child of inconsequence was heralded by angels as the true Savior, Lord, bearer of peace on Earth. It was a night like this when hope was hard to find and the only way to find room was it make it for yourself. It was a night like this....a night that seemed like any other night. A night when the excluded and forgotten made their way in search of a newborn sleeping in a makeshift crib...a child treated who was treated with the same disregard as their little ones....a child who, if he was truly a savior, would turn the tables on the inequality of the poor. A night in which we can't help but remember Mary's song: *God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.*

Jesus is always being born on nights like this....wherever people need him most. If 2020 has taught us anything it is how desperately we need to receive the birth of God's

love into our very world.....Immanuel.... God is with us...love's pure light....the one who brings peace on Earth. On a night like this we should pay attention because I believe with all my heart the angels are bringing good news of great joy once again of God's incarnation here on earth for the disenfranchised, forgotten, hurting, grieving, humble and poor. Let us listen for the heavenly music and then kneel at the manger. Amen.