

# The Meaning of Christmas

Luke 2:1-20

Merry Christmas!

What did I just do? What did I mean? What do you mean when you wish someone a Merry Christmas? Is it now nothing more than the meaningless, “How are you?” “Fine,” while disregarding your throbbing headache and greater issues in your life.” What is this thing we are wishing on our unsuspecting populace?

The beginning of the story of Jesus’ birth begins with the mention of Caesar Augustus.

This conjures up old history lessons featuring mighty Roman palaces, and unstoppable armies, and unbridled power, of political domination of over half the known world, of unspeakable riches and the search for even more of what lay just beyond Rome’s grasp.

Regarding the power of a Roman emperor, Seneca, a tutor and advisor to Nero, rightly imagines the thoughts of Nero in this musing on his power.

“Have I of all mortals found favor with Heaven and been chosen to serve on earth as vicar of the gods?

“I am the arbiter of life and death for the nations; it rests in my power what each man's lot and state shall be; by my lips Fortune proclaims what gift she would bestow on each human being; from my utterance peoples and cities gather reasons for rejoicing; without my favor and grace no part of the wide world can prosper; all those many thousands of swords which my peace restrains will be drawn at my nod; what nations shall be utterly destroyed, which banished, which shall receive the gift of liberty, which have it taken from them, what kings shall become slaves and whose heads shall be crowned with royal honor, what cities shall fall and which shall rise: this it is mine to decree.”<sup>i</sup>

It is often said that the president of the United States is the most powerful man in the free world. Yet, his power is minute compared to that of a Roman emperor.

Our first Scripture reading this morning tells us of Israel’s desire to be led by a king, “like other nations.” This is depicted not as a rejection of Samuel, who was Israel’s de facto leader, but of God, who would be the only king of Israel. So they rejected God’s kingship.

In another passage, Samuel warns what it will be like for Israel to have a king who is not God:

*So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, ‘These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.’ (1 Samuel 8:10-18)*

These are the ways of a king, of an emperor. Virtually everything a king touches turns to injustice. Everything done is to enrich himself and his courtiers. So in Rome, the 1% took the wealth away from the 99%ers and lived like kings, and the rest like paupers.

This is the world into which Jesus was born, as noted by his biographer, Luke. But Augustus's name here is not to prioritize the hierarchy of the players in this drama, from highest to lowest, but to serve as a contrast to God as king.

Entering into this story is like entering into Tiffany's Fifth Ave. store in Manhattan, walking up to a display case and noting the prices of the jewelry. There a 5 karat diamond ring is priced as \$1.50, while right next to it is a chrome and rhinestone bracelet for \$10,000.

You'd rightfully say, "Something's very wrong here. Who switched the price tags?" Only to find out that they are priced correctly.

Walking into Luke's story is like walking into a Tiffany's with all the price tags switched.

It's a study of contrasts; it's a study of a world upside down; for it's really a study of what God values.

Not lost on us if we were paying attention this Advent season is Mary's song, where she extols the way of God:

*He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts 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. (Luke 1:51-53)*

There you have it. When Luke came across this beautiful text attributed to Jesus' mother, he immediately saw what God is doing. God is reversing the way of kings, the way of Rome, by switching the world's price tags. God is bringing down the powerful from their thrones and lifting up the lowly; God is filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty. In contrast to the glorious city with its Roman palaces of splendor, Jesus is born in a stable, in a remote, even backward village, not notable in any way. For God values Bethlehem over Rome. God values the ordinary over the elite. This is good news for the 99%, for we are very ordinary.

I've been to Bethlehem. It is not the enchanted place I had imagined. It is a Palestinian city occupied by Israel. It is very much like the Bethlehem of Joseph and Mary: a harsh, oppressive place where government policies disrupts lives; a place of hardship, poverty and injustice. Yet God put God's son there because God's favor rests on places like this all over the world.

Much was said by Seneca and Samuel about courtiers, the hangers-on around the throne. This is a place of intrigue and jealousies, a place of vast favor and enormous power. Yet, when God chose the parents of the Messiah, he chose peasants, Joseph and Mary.

I hope you noticed, in this time of reflection and sorrow over Newtown, CT, that God did not relieve Joseph and Mary of their trying circumstances. Joseph walked the dangerous rout to Bethlehem, while Mary rode a donkey. They could not find room in the inn, so had to bear with the weather and stench of the livestock in the manger. And even more troubling, rather than spare the infants from King Herod's slaughter, the massacre ensued.

Christianity is not a way out of trouble, but the promise of the presence of God in and through the trouble. Why such things as the massacre of babies in Palestine or Newtown happen is a question for another sermon. Suffice it to say for now that, contrary to the pronouncement of several religious pundits, God was not absent from this crisis, but right there in the middle of it, suffering along with the grieving and calling the community together to bring life out of death, just as in the days of old when Rachel wept for her children.

When something good happens to you, your first reaction is likely, “Whom should I tell? With whom should I share this wonderful news?” We think first of our loved ones, and eagerly share with them our happiness.

So whom did God tell of the birth of Jesus? The ones he loved the most, of course, shepherds watching their flocks by night. Now what you may not know about shepherds is that if the world is divided up into the 1% with most of everything and the 99% with little or nothing, the shepherds were in the bottom 1%. Because of their daily exposure to the nastiness of their job, they were considered perpetually unclean and rarely were admitted into the temple for worship.

Yet, it is these who were permitted the first glimpse of the Christ child, in the company of angels...*and [God] lifted up the lowly; and has filled the hungry with good things,* God bypassed Rome, the emperor and the courtiers and invited shepherds to the manger. For God values the people over the privileged.

Yet Caesar, the courtiers and the rest of the 1% are not left out of the blessings of this story, either. The big theological word for the story of Jesus’ birth is Incarnation, that is, the embodiment of God in a human being. Christians confess that in Jesus we see God most completely. The narrow view of Incarnation is that God is found only in Jesus. The wider view is that the Incarnation means that God is dwelling in all creation, from the smallest particle into the furthest corners of space. It is in this sense that we can use another big theological word, God is omnipresent. God is everywhere, in everything and in everyone! Even the kings and their courts!

One early Christian theologian, Athanasius, included all humans in the incarnation by saying Jesus “became what we are that he might make us what he is.” [Repeat] What people once saw in Jesus, as he walked our earth, taught his disciples, and lived out God’s purpose for us before our eyes, is, according to Athanasius, the purpose of our lives, as well. We are to house God in our bodies, that the light of God might shine through us.

So the Incarnation can happen, nay, must happen in you and in me. It could have happened in Caesar, or in King Herod, as it happened in Jesus, and must happen in us. For the Incarnation is finally not just about God being formed in the man Jesus alone, but about God being formed in us. Next time you look at yourself in the mirror, imagine that you see the presence of God literally living in every pore of your body, in every cell and every electron that holds you together. For God is truly there, aching to be seen on the outside, as well.

That’s the story of Christmas, the story of God becoming a man, of the possibility of God being displayed in every human, the real meaning of Christmas. So when you wish someone a Merry Christmas, wish for them and for yourself, God be in you, Emanuel has come.

Merry Christmas! AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> <http://thriceholly.net/Texts/Mercy.html>