

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

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Sermon, December 24, 2022

Luke 2:1-20

I think God sees things differently than we do.

For example, the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke, which we read tonight, begins with Emperor Augustus. Emperor Augustus was the most powerful man in the known world. Vast armies under his command. Uncountable wealth at his disposal. When Emperor Augustus said, “jump,” you jumped. When Emperor Augustus said, “Go to the town of your heritage to be registered,” you went to the town of your heritage to be registered, even if you were nine months pregnant. Because, well, let’s just put it this way, things would go better for you if you did what Emperor Augustus said, and they would go worse for you if you didn’t.

The Christmas story in Luke ends with shepherds, who have very little power, not much wealth, and who don’t get listened to much, much less obeyed. If they said, “jump,” people probably wouldn’t jump. Nevertheless, that’s who ends up proclaiming the birth of Jesus, Savior of the world.

In between, we worship a baby laying in a manger, a feed trough, because there was no other place for Mary and Joseph to put him and they were just trying to do the best they could with what they had. We serve a refugee king, whom Herod was trying to kill, so they fled into the desert. We listen for an army of angels (that’s what the Greek calls them, a stratiotai, same root as the word “strategy”) an army of angels that makes itself known, not by slamming its boots down on the pavement of Market Street, but rather by singing. We trust the cross, by which Jesus sacrificed himself to save us, and the resurrection which reaches beyond death.

I think God asks us to see things differently, too.

Let me tell you about a couple of people that I knew many years ago, in one of my former parishes, in order to explain what I mean. This was a tiny congregation in central Kentucky, with a very big debt. If you have ever had a big debt, you will know that a debt can be like Emperor Augustus. When the debt says, "Jump," you jump. It can suck out the energy of a congregation's ministry, just as it can suck out the energy of a family's happy times, or an individuals' dreams. It's like many other things that loom over us: mental conditions like anxiety or depression, addictions, conflict or separation in the family, oppression like racism or sexism or just plain grief. All of these can dominate our lives as people, families and churches.

Nevertheless, this was a great bunch of people. For example, there was a woman there, around this time of year, we called her the Christmas Queen. She liked that name. She had a different sweater for every day between Thanksgiving and New Year's. She had Santa sweaters, Rudolf sweaters. She had those sweaters with the Christmas trees on them with lights that really light up.

The Christmas Queen had a Christmas tree in every room of her house. She had a University of Texas Christmas tree; a Micky Mouse Christmas tree. Her husband had a Hannukah corner because he was Jewish. He kept his menorah there and his collection of dreidels. Christmas in their house was an exuberant, abundant affair.

The Christmas Queen came to church almost every Sunday and served on committees, and decorated the Sanctuary at Christmas, with grace and good taste.

The other person I want to tell you about, I'll call him Jason. Jason would lean against his mom on the back pew one Sunday a month, or every other month. I'm afraid Christmas in Jason's house was probably not as exuberant or as abundant as in the Christmas Queen's. Jason's father had been a firefighter, but his back had been hurt, so that he could not work. He sat in his chair all day, in constant pain, this man who had made his living by the strength of his body, now unable to contribute to the household. So, Mom worked extra hours to make ends meet, which was hard.

If I had been evil, I would have disregarded Jason's family. After all, they didn't come to church that much, like the Christmas Queen did. They could not serve on committees. And how could they possibly help us pay off our debt? How can they benefit the church? I might have thought this way. But God is merciful. God made sure I knew that attitude was evil.

Well, one Sunday Jason was leaning against his mom on the back pew during Advent, the time when we prepare for Christmas. And I was preaching about the

food pantry we had at that church, which, it was a great food pantry. Unlike many of the food pantries in that place and time, we did not require proof of a low income. We did not require proof of citizenship. Other food pantries did because there was great fear, great fear of being cheated, of being taken advantage of. “Can’t let people take advantage of the church!”

People would come to our food pantry and they would say, “What do you need to see? Do you need my welfare check stub? Do you need a driver’s license? I said, “No. We need your name, so we can pray for you.”

I tell you, I am not making this up. People would literally stand up taller when I said that to them. Because now they were coming to the church for help, they were coming to Jesus for help, and Jesus was treating them with dignity.

People would say, “I’d go hungry, that would be okay, but I’ve got kids in the house and I have to feed them.” I would say, “Would you like to pray for anything?” Always, always they prayed, for aunts and uncles who had cancer, for children who couldn’t walk or couldn’t hear, for sisters and brothers struggling with addictions. Always, we prayed.

And yes, we were taken advantage of maybe four or five times in the fourteen years I served at that church. But those four or five times were well worth the literally hundreds of times people walked away from our church with a sense of God’s honor and dignity and care in their hearts. This is the job of the church, to show the world who Jesus is. The job of the church is not to serve itself. The job of the church is to share Jesus. That’s what that food pantry did.

I preached this sermon during Advent, with Jason there in the back, leaning against his mom. Weeks went by after that and it was Christmas Eve. The Christmas Queen decorated the church with evergreen branches and candles in the windows to pray for peace. The Christmas tree was bright with lights and all the cristmons. We sang the Christmas carols and we sang Silent Night with the candles, and it was glorious.

After church was over, I was putting things away, and Jason’s mother came up to me. She said, “Jason has something he wants to give you.” I said, “Oh, that’s nice,” because sometimes kids draw things for me and it always makes me happy. But she did not hand me a drawing. Instead, she handed me a five-dollar bill and three ones.

“That’s Jason’s Christmas money,” she said. “He wants to give it to the food pantry, to help somebody who really needs it.”

Now, every once in a while, an angel comes to us, and keeps us from saying the stupidest thing we could possibly say in the entire universe. That night, an angel came and kept me from saying the stupidest thing I could possibly have said in the entire universe at that moment, which would have been, “Oh, Jason, keep your eight dollars. Buy something you like. Your eight dollars is not going to do that much to help anyone else.”

But I did not say that. Instead, the angel took over my voice and said, “Thank you, Jason, this is really going to help someone who needs it.”

I think Jason saw things differently than most of us usually do.

And the Christmas Queen? Perhaps you might think that I am telling this story to suggest that Jason understands the true meaning of Christmas and maybe the Christmas Queen not so much. That, maybe those of us who are Christmas Queens and Kings should tone it down a bit. But I am not telling this story to suggest that. If you are a Christmas Queen or a Christmas King, don't tone it down. It's Christmas!

Here's why I'm telling you this story: The Christmas Queen lost a baby boy, her firstborn son. She had two more children after that because her spirit was unstoppable. But she lost her first. She and her husband struggled for years with why God would allow such a terrible thing to happen.

And now here she was celebrating the birth of a baby boy, with light and beauty and exuberance, because the light of Christ reaches beyond grief. It reaches beyond debt, it reaches beyond the powers like Emperor Augustus which make us jump, powers like depression and anxiety and addiction and oppression and racism and sexism and just trying to make ends meet. The light of Christ reaches beyond death.

Jason understood the power of the cross, the power of sacrifice for someone else. The Christmas Queen understood the power of the resurrection, the light in the darkness, shining beyond the grave.

Jason and the Christmas Queen worshipped a baby in a manger, a feed trough where Mary and Joseph put him because there was no place else and they were just trying to do their best with what they had. Jason and the Christmas Queen served a refugee king on the run from a petty tyrant. Jason and the Christmas Queen heard an army of angels which did not stomp its boots on the pavement of Market Street, but, instead, sang.

Jason and the Christmas Queen saw things that way God sees—differently. Perhaps we could see things differently too.

Merry Christmas