

Love BIG
Loving Like God: Christmas Series
"Everyone's Included"
Luke 2:1-20
December 23

Welcome and series intro...

There are days when I am pretty sure that the world we live in is a mess. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not a defeated person who has given up...far from it. But, when I'm completely honest with myself, there are some days when the struggle is real, right? There are plenty of times when I look at the things that are happening in our world and I just need to go to God and ask, "what's going on." Is there something we were supposed to do that we didn't, is there a lesson we're supposed to be learning, most likely. I keep thinking that we, as people, as the human race, should be getting better. Personally, I know that I am not standing in that line at the county assistance office feeling demoralizing about my situation, I'm not in a food line or a clothing bank where someone else is telling me what I can have and my choices are down to whatever might be left. And in a would like this, Jesus comes to us – in a manger – in Bethelhem. I can only imagine how it was for Mary and Joseph that time when they had to travel 80 miles on foot / donkey, Mary very pregnant, to fill out paperwork for a census...really. What a mess.

All thanks to Caesar Augustus, who is quite a character. Augustus was, and is still recognized, as a great leader. As the first emperor of Rome, he brought the Pax Romana, or "roman peace," to the empire. Civil wars, tribal conflicts, wars between territories were vastly decreased. Aqueducts, infrastructure, all those good things were developed. Of course, there was a tradeoff for all this peace and prosperity. People were conquered, countries forcefully overtaken, and any civil unrest was immediately squelched. The PAX was not for all people. Definitely not loving BIG. To pay for everything he was doing he called for a tax. In order to tax everyone he needed to know how many people there were so, the census.

God had forbidden the Jews to "count" their population. If there was a need for a census, it was at the direction of Yahweh. As one Rabbi says, "Out of love for His people, God counted us at important junctures of our history. The completion of the Tabernacle was one of these occasions. Censuses were only taken when God directed them. We read in 2 Samuel that King David conducted a census on his own, and the response was that God sent a plague upon them!

So, the Jews in the Roman Empire had to go to their hometowns, register at the order of a false God (the emperor) to pay a tax to that false god, to fund the opulence of the palace and all the finery of that false god, and to support a government that was occupying them. This included Joseph and the very pregnant Mary, who had to travel 80 miles to Bethlehem, either on foot or with a donkey.

It's hard to find some good news in this story if you don't know what's really happening. I'm sure Mary was exhausted. Joseph may have been stressed about the bottom line, how am I going to pay for this unexpected "vacation". And there was also the stigma that they were engaged and not married. In effect, the worlds a mess...from the top – Caesar – to the bottom – Mary and Joseph. But...

God works his best even in our mess.

In the middle of the mess, God was at work, bringing about a new world for all those who would live from that moment on. There would be a new King, a new Lord, a new way of governing the people, a new hope and a new future. Mary and Joseph found a stable in Bethlehem, which was so crowded, and there Jesus was born. This is good news, God with us, Emmanuel. But who is this good news for? Is it just Mary and Joseph? Is it for Harod and Caesar? Or was it for just the shepherds and wisemen like most of our nativities represent?

This is good news for all, especially for people like the shepherds!

The shepherds had to live under the same occupying government, and most likely had to go through all the same government hoops as Mary and Joseph. But their lives had changed dramatically over the past hundreds of years. Shepherds in the Hebrew Bible are revered. Psalm 23 says the Lord is my Shepherd. King David is first a shepherd before he becomes king of all Israel. But somehow, shepherds became despised in their own community. Scholars say that when the Hebrews were taken captive to Egypt, they adopted Egyptian ways. Egyptians valued farming crops, not raising animals. Sheep and goats were nuisances who ate their crops. Those who took care of sheep and goats were not valued. Besides, shepherds are dirty and smelly. They were unable to take part in synagogue and other holy days due to being unclean (dealing with sheep and all their... stuff). Sounds pretty messy, doesn't it.

According to **Associate Professor of Religion James Hansen** at St. Olaf College Northfield, Minn, *They were also seen as dishonest and crafty, for they were often accused of grazing their sheep on land that was not theirs; thus the early rabbis counted them among those who were unfit to serve as witnesses or judges! On this score, it's hard to avoid seeing the shepherds as foreshadowing the type of people to whom Jesus himself will bring "good news" -- as well as the reaction it will generate. So the Hebrews adopted the thoughts of their captors, the government and "false god". They forgot and devalued their shepherding roots.*

But the angels appeared to them. Scripture says it was a host, or an army! So, while people were paying taxes to support another god's army, the true God sends an army of angels to announce the birth of the new King of Kings! And the message was PEACE, not war, like most armies would announce.

At first, the shepherds were afraid. I don't blame them. That's what happens when life gets messy...we can get afraid. Messiness can create fear when we feel like life is out of control. But they were reassured. This was "Good news of great joy! The savior was born unto YOU."

Jesus breaks through our fear.

The rulers were even more afraid. Herod was frightened of losing his power. Caesar would be very protective of his reign. The good news was scary for many. The religious leaders of the time were afraid of Jesus and later would order his crucifixion.

What would the angels' song mean to the shepherds on that hill outside Bethlehem? What kind of good news would that be? To YOU this day is born the savior, the one who is messiah and lord. The government will rest on HIS shoulders. The Prince of Peace.

The Bethlehem shepherds were near the bottom of the social and financial pile. They had absolutely nothing to gain, and certainly nothing to lose. They were empty vessels, waiting to be filled to overflowing with God's joy. When they heard that there was a new King born who would rescue Israel from her misery and establish justice, they rejoiced. They rushed to find the new baby. They were proof that God's message is for everyone, from the highest to the lowest, from the faithful churchgoer to the seeker and the skeptic. God's word is for everyone. With God, everyone makes the cut.

Glory to God in the highest, and peace upon whom God's favor rests. Maybe you feel like the shepherds right now. Maybe you are feeling forgotten and stuck in some mess that you can't control. This good news is for all, and especially for you today, God's favor rests on you. Maybe you have a message for the rest of us like the shepherds had for Bethlehem. If God had gone to Caesar or Herod or anyone else in power, they would have tried to turn this miraculous event to their advantage. "How can we use this to increase our prestige? Can we make money off this announcement?" This was Good News for the world in which emperors and kings thought they ran the show but in fact, they were not in charge, we are not in charge...God is.

For those of us who have been redeemed, who know this love, who accept this good news... What if we learned to sing this song now? If we were to take this scripture seriously, what would we do differently?

Graphic: The forgotten need to know that God is for them.

God chooses to reach others through us.

Who are the forgotten that desperately need to know that God is FOR them, even when it seems everyone and everything is against them? Because, interestingly, God chooses to reach others through... us. As Wright says, "This new baby grew up not to be a dictator who kills off all his enemies, but one who talked about the reign of God coming like seeds growing secretly, like a shepherd looking for a lost sheep, like the vineyard owner renting a vineyard to tenant farmers and coming back later to collect the fruit." We are those tenant farmers. We are the secret seeds growing to tell that there is hope, there is good news of great joy. Who will we love big? And how will we love big...making sure everyone knows that God loves them BIG?

Jesus is Lord of all or not Lord at all...Amen? And if this is true, that Jesus is our Messiah and Lord, then that "must translate into something far more solid and life-changing and community-rescuing than simply a warm nostalgic inner glow..." Jesus is not simply Lord in a distant heaven or stowed away in our hearts, leaving the public world untouched. The angels meant what they sang. They knew that would bring a love so BIG that hearts would be changed, that "through Jesus' followers picking up the threads of his own public career and living as kingdom-people under his

direction, bringing his saving rule to bear in acts of love and mercy, working for justice and truth whether it's for... shepherds who are relying on assistance, asylum seekers desperate for help, or the planet as human greed and carelessness make the Earth a place of danger and pollution instead of joy and beauty."

Love Big...in the next couple of days you will have some serious opportunities to share with those who might be forgotten. Some may be in your own families. You may encounter people in your travels that seem forgotten or like outsiders.... (wrap up)