

Christmas 2025

Scripture without context has little meaning for us. The first thing to know is that scripture is not history. Scripture is theology. In interpreting scripture we must first try to understand, as best we can, the writers agenda; then we must locate the particular scriptural passage in the writer's world... what his world was like; what were the social, economic and political issues of the day... and then, perhaps the most difficult task: We must bring our post-modern world into the conversation. How does this revelation, if there be revelation, speak to us in our own time and situation.

Our Gospel reading appointed for Christmas is from Luke. We are fortunate that Luke has some deference for his audience; an appreciation for context. He tells us that the world about which he writes is occupied by empire, in the time of Augustus, the emperor.... The emperor has instituted a "registration," a census.... A census was used by the empire to conscript slaves and troops; and to generally keep tabs on the local population, with a suspicious eye towards possible revolts. A census would have been coerced; effected under the auspices of occupying troops. It was a list upon which no one wished to be. The people of the region are under duress, in short. They live in fear of the designs of their occupiers. Throughout Israel's biblical history, Empire had been the problem; from the Egyptians, to the Moabites, the Babylonians, the Assyrians.... And now Rome. The problem, of course, is the shame, indignity and fear... not to mention violence, engendered by the self-interested powerful over the people. And still; it is the world's problem, then and now.

Luke sets his thematic agenda at the outset of his Gospel. In Mary's soliloquy in the prologue she calls for a radical reversal in the way of things: The powerful are routed, the poor and the disenfranchised are raised up to dignity; all are to share in the abundance of creation in a radical redistribution of wealth and resources. It is a vision of how the world is meant to be. That makes this Gospel intensely social, economic, and political. It is a critique of the rigid hierarchy that has ruled the world since 7000 B.C.E.

The operative context, the literary imagery, in this birth narrative is darkness, literal and proverbial... and poverty. The birth of Jesus, the savior of the world takes place at night, in a make-shift barn for a shelter, among the poor of the land. All in some way, displaced. This scene is prominent in the tableau of our faith iconography. What do we make of such a story? And we have the advantage, or perhaps the tragedy of hindsight.... Nothing has changed in twenty one centuries of human development. Empire, by whatever name, still rules with callous indifference to the well-being and dignity of the people. The poor, the immigrant, all the scapegoated, languish still, even in our own beloved democracy commandeered by the powerful, as we speak.

What shall we say as Christians who believe in a loving God? Where is our hope in the face of a vision that falters in its consummation? Does the birth of Jesus still hold meaning and promise for us?

Luke's narrative of Jesus's birth borders on the poetic. In the Greek it reads with a metronomic pulse. I was taught as an English Major to always look to the center of the

poem for the meaning. The heart of this story is the child, a shining symbol of the most vulnerable among us: A child born among the poor and in the midst of the dark. A child demands our most ardent attention. A child will not make it on its own. I think this is a story about empathy. At the heart of Jesus's teaching is the call to radical empathy: mercy, compassion, healing care, welcome, justice... to care first and foremost for our vulnerable neighbor. Plato argued that empathy is the highest form of knowledge. I see in this story the proclamation that empathy, that is to say, the way of Jesus, is the salvation of the world. Empathy is the song of the human spirit; and that spirit, brothers and sisters, is invincible; and is forever born among us. Empire will remain empire, extroverted and center stage.... But empathy enters the world in the stillness of the dark... among the poor, the disenfranchised, among the outcasts. The light of the world enters from the margins, among God's lost people. And just that; just that creates infinite possibility for the world entire... Pray for this poor child; and pray that this light of empathy become a fire... that the fire is ours to give the world. Know that the darkness recoils at the mystery and mastery of it... until all the world is filled with praise.... Gloria in Excelsis Deo.