

“A DECREE WENT OUT”

A Sermon for Christmas Eve, 2016

Text: Luke 2:1-20

This is how the story begins—in several different versions of the Bible:

^{NRS} (New Revised Standard Version) In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered; or,

^{RSV} In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. or

^{NIV} In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

^{GWN} At that time the Emperor Augustus ordered a census of the Roman Empire.

^{ASV} Now it came to pass in those days, there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be enrolled.

^{KJV} And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.

^{NAB} In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled.

^{NAS} Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth.

^{NET} Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus to register all the empire for taxes.

^{NJB} Now it happened that at this time Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be made of the whole inhabited world.

Finally, in the original:

Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις ἐξῆλθεν δόγμα παρὰ Καίσαρος Αὐγούστου ἀπογράφεσθαι πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην.

So you could translate it either “Caesar” or “Emperor.” It could be “all the world,” or “all the inhabited earth,” or “the Roman Empire.” Could be “census,” could be “enrollment” or “taxation.” But all of the translations seem to agree that it was a “decree,” which in the Greek original is the word “dogma.” Interesting. A “dogma” went out from Caesar.

Reflect with me for a few minutes on the significance of the first verse of the Christmas story from Luke. Our songs and hymns and readings flesh out everything else—angels, shepherds, Mary, Joseph, the baby—but the Emperor Augustus gets short shrift in them.

Why does Luke lead off in this way? The emperor makes a decree! And that decree applies to “the whole world.” And it is primarily for the purpose of regulation/taxation.

Sometimes, when you study a biblical text, a simple word *count* reveals something. In this case, the word “whole,” as in “the whole world.” All four gospels make abundant use of the Greek word for “all, every, whole, entire.” Why? The four authors have something to say which applies to everyone. How else can you say

that? In twenty verses of our story this evening, we heard the word four times. And why does Luke start his story with the emperor of the world sending a decree out which everyone must obey, so he can tax them?

For contrast.

The author sets up a startling contrast between the *apparent* ruler of all, on the one hand, and the God who is *indeed* Lord of all, on the other.

Luke is saying “The most powerful ruler in the world sent out an instruction or decree, that everyone should be accountable to him. Meanwhile, the Lord of the universe was sending out a gospel, that everyone should become free. That gospel came in the inauspicious form of an insignificant childbirth in a stable.”

Caesar sends out a decree. God sends out a decree. The one decree makes it clear that all people are subservient to his majesty Augustus. The other decree frees people from sin and death, and places us under the gentle rule of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Caesar was saying that everyone must admit they are his subjects. God was, too. The contrast is beautiful, at many points.

For example, it says in the Greek that Augustus sent out his decree (or dogma) to the entire “*oikoumene*.” That word is the root of our word ecumenical, which applies to the church, the entire “world” of people who are united in Christ. It means literally “one household.” “*Oikos*” “*mene*.”

Augustus made the world into “one household” by crushing nations. God makes the world into “one household” by giving life to all through his Son Jesus. Augustine makes people subjects by making them afraid. God makes people subjects by taking away our fear.

As God says through the prophet Isaiah to humankind: “Your thoughts are not my thoughts, nor are your ways my ways.” Indeed.

Caesar August backed up his decree force of arms. God sent his good-news Son to be born without benefit of doctor or doula in backwater Judea. And they laid him in a manger, because there was no room in the inn. Shepherds—yes, *shepherds*—called on the family.

Your ways are not my ways. Truly.

You and I know who won. Augustus died before Jesus even began to minister. His empire lasted a couple hundred more years. Whereas Jesus’ kingdom of peace shall last forever and ever. The truth will out!

Luke already knew how this was going to turn out in the long run, and he has an interesting way of telling it.

The book of Acts, which completes the book of Luke, has what seems like a very strange ending until you juxtapose it with this story in Luke 2. In Acts 28, the emperor has come back into play. (The successor to Augustus.) Paul has been arrested for proclaiming the dogma of Jesus around the Roman Empire and setting people free from the law of sin and death. He has been telling people that all people are of the house and lineage of God, and they should not be afraid, in the name of Jesus, and he gets arrested. So off to Rome with him, since he has appealed to the highest court, the emperor himself. Paul gets to Rome after an interesting voyage, and this is how the last chapter ends:

Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen." He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about

the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. Luke doesn't quite spell it out, but you get the idea, I hope, that the emperor seems to be countenancing Paul's message about the salvation of God. He was proclaiming the kingdom of God, and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and *without hindrance*. Thus ends the Book of Acts. Thus ends the writing of Luke, who had done all the research and wanted to let us know about "the things that have happened."

There is no climactic struggle at the end. No defiant speech by Paul, who would eventually be executed, after all. But Luke lets us who are paying attention know that although the Roman Emperor was great at certain limited things like taxing the whole world, right under his nose it was possible to speak of a higher Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ, with impunity.

Whose decree mattered, ultimately? Who carried the day? Who is Lord of all? To whom do you belong?

You know the truth. Your Lord was born that Christmas night, and in his face you and I see the truth about God: that you and I are God's children; that God loves us; that our sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake; that we are enrolled permanently in whatever database he keeps of his children; that you and I are brothers and sisters to all, because of the *oikoumene* Jesus Christ is building out of his own body.

You and I know whose decree/dogma gives life.

So, we turn to Bethlehem, because we are of the house and lineage of Jesus. We listen to the songs of angels. The murmuring of shepherds. The cry of this particular baby. The testimony of Luke, and of Paul.

"In these days, the decree still rings out from God the Father almighty, that all the world should be set free . . ."

We listen to the One who is forever. With Mary, we keep these things and ponder them in our hearts.

Amen

