

Preacher: Tim Hollenberg-Duffey

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38, 2:1-7

Author Peter Rollins tells this contemporary parable: “Around a large campfire late one autumn evening, Jesus comforted his disciples by speaking to them of a heavenly realm that far surpasses the beauty of anything on earth. He spoke of a place that never grows dark or cold, a vast city that is filled with beautiful mansions, with streets of gold, and with unending expanses of green and fertile land—a place of perpetual peace and fulfillment.

“Jesus spoke of this kingdom late into the night, painting pictures of heaven until the fire began to turn to ash and a chill filled the air. One by one, each of his disciples drifted off to sleep with the images of heavenly treasure and luxurious mansions feeding their dreams.

“In the end, only Jesus and a poor, unknown, and uneducated disciple are left, each on lost in thought, watching as the cinders of fire began to die.

After some time had passed, this solitary disciple looked over to Jesus and spoke.

“‘I was wondering about something,’ he said.

“Jesus replied, ‘Yes my friend.’

‘Well, there are so many people who follow you now that I can’t help worrying that someone like me, an old, uneducated sinner, may get overlooked amidst all the great thinkers, politicians, preachers, and radicals who are being attracted to you and your message.’

“Then he turned his face away and continued, ‘I’ve never been in a mansion; in fact, I have never even seen one. So, I don’t care too much if I miss out on all of that. But tell me, will there be room enough for me when I die—will there be somewhere for me to stay in this kingdom of which you speak?’

“Jesus looked at this man with compassion. ‘Don’t worry,’ he whispered, in a tone that could barely be heard over the distant contented noises of the sleeping crowd. ‘Tucked away in a tiny corner of heaven, away from all the grand mansions and streets of gold, there is a cramped little stable. It doesn’t look like much inside or out, but on a clear night you can see the stars shine bright amidst the cracks, and you can feel the warm breeze caress your skin. In this kingdom, that is where I live, and you would be welcome to live there with me.’”¹

There’s this familiar ambience of the Christmas story. A feeling that relaxes us and takes us back to beautiful candlelight services and snowy, cozy Christmas eves at home with family. I felt this as I read Rollins’ little story about the manger in heaven.

But this little story, just like the real Christmas story, is a story with far grander, world-altering, even dangerous themes than our cozy Christmases often allow. For these stories are about competing empires. The empires of mansions and temples and gold...and the empire of the manger. We know these empires of mansions well from our Bible reading. And Audrey reminded us last week as we turned the page and opened a new door into the New Testament that some of the context is same old, same old—some empire is still in power and it isn’t God’s empire. The Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, and now the Romans—there’s always an empire on top. Even during the majority of the existence of Israel and Judah, the kings on the throne behaved more like the emperors of the world than emissaries of God’s kingdom. So, it comes as no surprise to turn the page to the New Testament, to the Gospel of Luke, where we find empires.

Luke presents the empire to us right up front. In that all-familiar Christmas story opening line from Luke 2, “In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken

¹ Rollins, Peter. *The Orthodox Heretic*. Paraclete Press, 2009. 151-153.

of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.” The empire is at it again trying to take a census, and you know about those censuses—they’re all about taxes, keep the people poor and the king’s court rich. Remember, even King David got in trouble for taking a census of the people. And I would also add that the Temple had become a mere tool of the empire by this time, a part of the political system of King Herod, the puppet king of Rome. And the temple is featured in Luke’s Christmas story when Zechariah the father of John the Baptist encounters the angel of the Lord in the temple.

Under the shadow of empire, census, kings, and politics, the story of Jesus’ birth unfolds. It seems like the people of God are fighting a losing battle to the empires of the world. The empires just keep winning. But Jesus’ birth demands us to rethink where we are looking for victory. Like the disciple at the campfire with Jesus, are we looking in mansions or mangers?

Jesus is about to turn our understanding of empire upside-down. The story of Jesus’ birth in an humble manger, away from the glitz of kingly mansions, occurring during a time of political oppression is a mere prelude to the upside-down Kingdom of God that he will preach throughout Luke’s Gospel. For Luke, the mission of Jesus is announced by the angel Gabriel as he speaks to Mary: “You are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.” Gabriel says it quite clearly—Jesus’ mission is to reign, to rule the Kingdom of God which will from henceforth be directly juxtaposed with the empires of the world. The Gospel of Luke is a story of competing empires.

No story illustrates the competition better than the Christmas story which moves from kings to peasants in the same chapter. For upon Jesus’ birth, you know who receives the first announcements—the shepherds, the peasant farmers of the ancient world. It was not an announcement to King Herod, Governor Quirinius, or Caesar Augustus. Nor does the announcement go to the religious kingdom leaders—Pharisees, Sadducees, or scribes. This was the birth of a king for a new kingdom.

Then, for much of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus seeks to establish his Kingdom with the least of these. Luke more than any other Gospel gives special attention to those who are left out and forgotten by the empires of the world, whether they are religious empires or national empires. For the religious empire, they have become more concerned about following laws than ministering to people and, therefore, real people are forgotten by their temple-focused kingdom. And for the National Empire, they’ve become accumulators of wealth and power only, which allows no room for the have-nots. This means that many people are searching for a new place to belong, a new kingdom which will bring together a hodgepodge of the forgotten.

Consider a few of these people who are unique to the Gospel of Luke who find a place in the Kingdom of Jesus. First, consider those forgotten by the national empire. Luke tells a unique parable about a widow and an unjust judge in chapter 18. The widow day after day goes before the judge demanding justice only to be denied, until finally the judge is worn down and grants — a forgotten widow found no place in the empire but finds a place of justice in the Kingdom of God. Or how about the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in 16:19-31. The story contrasts a rich, lavish man with the poor, ill beggar Lazarus at his gate. Upon their death their roles are reversed. Lazarus, forgotten by the empire, finds his eternal comfort in the kingdom of God. Then there’s the story of Zacchaeus the tax collector in chapter 19. He’s found a way to work with the empire and does quite well for himself even though he’s ostracized by the religious community, but upon encountering Jesus, his heart is filled with honesty and generosity

to the point that he rejects the greed of national empire and joins Jesus' kingdom. Jesus' alternative Kingdom makes room for those forgotten by national empire.

Then there are those forgotten by the religious empire. Overly concerned by rules about the sabbath, Jesus repeatedly heals forgotten people on this day—a crippled woman(13:10-17), a man with dropsy(14:1-6), 10 lepers (17:11-19). The religious empire would prefer they suffer than be healed on the sabbath; they were forgotten, but they find a home in Christ's kingdom. The parables of the prodigal son and the good Samaritan are also unique to Jesus and they speak of the outcasts, too—the prodigal son, a repentant sinner, and the Samaritan, hated by the Jews of that time, are both welcome in Christ's kingdom.

While the empires of the world are far more keen on maintaining their control and power at the expense of real people, Jesus' kingdom will focus on real people first. In this alternative upside-down kingdom, people are more important than money, law, tradition, enemies, status, lines of inside-outside, or control.

Luke's Gospel is one of the people and for the people. Luke is preparing a religious community to go boldly beyond their comfort zones. He's paving the way for the inclusion of gentiles and Jews to worship together, for sick people to no longer be ostracized, and for rich and poor to work hand in hand.

The Kingdom of God should clash with the practices of the world. It's the very nature of its arrival in the Christ child at Christmas through the murder of Christ on the cross. The empires are clashing because they prefer not to put people first.

And so, Luke speaks to us very similarly today as he did to those first century Christians and asks us, "What values have you picked up from the world that are keeping you from putting people first?" The values that got in the way then still do—wealth and greed, personal prejudice, stigma, religious order. May Luke push us toward the Kingdom of God which always puts people and their restoration first.

I want to close with a quote from CS Lewis' book, *The Screwtape Letters*, which gives the perspective of a demon as he seeks to influence a young man. Note prosperity could be substituted by a myriad of world values. Lewis writes, "Prosperity knits a man to the world, He feels that he is 'finding his place in it,' while really it is finding its place in him. His increasing reputation, his widening circle of acquaintances, his sense of importance, the growing pressure of absorbing and agreeable work build up in him a sense of being really at home on earth, which is just what we want. You will notice that the young are generally less unwilling to die than the middle-aged and the old. The truth is that the enemy, having oddly destined these mere animals to life in his own eternal world, has guarded them pretty effectively from the danger of feeling at home anywhere else."²

As Jesus arrives on the scene, the empires are clashing. Which do you call home? Amen.

²CS Lewis. *The Screwtape Letters* -Cited in Christianity Today, November 16, 1998, 82.