

“REJOICE! RESPOND!”
Luke 2: 1-20; Titus 2:11-14
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He was honored as lord. He was called the son of god. He was hailed as a bringer of peace. He was proclaimed as the savior of the world. His name: **Caesar Augustus!** Born 63 years before Jesus, he earned those titles through his successes in unifying an empire rent by civil war, rebuilding Rome physically and politically, enlarging her territories and increasing her influence over the known world. There was no one more powerful and important in the world than Caesar Augustus. But a baby born in a forgotten outpost of the Roman Empire would change that forever.

In their book, *The First Christmas*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan remind us that Rome, not Jerusalem, was the center of all power and glory on the night Jesus was born.(1) The few eyes focused on the manger could not compare with the legions of eyes focused on the nephew of the great Julius Caesar. For those under the rule of Rome, Caesar really was god with a small “g,” because he had power over every aspect of their lives. Caesar Augustus stands tall as one of the most significant leaders in the history of the world, and his achievements remain impressive even today. Yet not a single person on earth refers to him as “lord” today, while two billion people call Jesus --- born as an insignificant peasant --- Lord, Savior and God.

Borg and Crossan note the irony, but it is Luke who first raises it in the words we (have) (will soon) hear read, ***“In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.”*** (2:1) Note the power and imperial arrogance displayed here. With a mere decree, a pregnant Mary and a harried Joseph are sent scurrying like ants from a disturbed hill. Caesar’s desire to count his subjects will force Joseph and Mary out on the open road in the final days of her pregnancy. His thirst for the tax revenue will force Mary to give birth in a stable. By all accounts and appearances, Rome pulls the strings and the people of the provinces are merely puppets.

But wait! Things are not at all what they appear to be. God is in charge here, after all. The mighty king’s edict merely serves God’s purpose to fulfill the prophecy in Micah 5:2 that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. This is just the beginning of the story! The emperor’s titles will not outlive him. His power will die when he dies. His glory will soon fade. But the one born in a stable continues to attract the attention of the world. It is his birth we gather to celebrate tonight, not Caesar’s.

We have something new in our sanctuary this Christmas. Last year the Beardsley family gave our church a beautiful Italian ceramic Nativity --- complete with shepherds, wise men, Mary, Joseph and Baby Jesus. Pat Cermak, who lovingly did almost all of our church decorating again this year, wanted the children to be able to see the beautiful figures, over two feet tall, up close and personal, not crammed together in the display case behind the glass where we had them last year. And so this fall, Dick Erickson took some scrap wood and made a crèche, so that the Holy Family would have someplace to hang out during the holiday season. This crèche reminds us that when Jesus came to

earth, there was no room for him in the inn, so he was born out back in the stable, where the cows and chickens are kept.

Through the years, Nativity sets have been made in all shapes and sizes. Every ethnic group depicts Mary and Joseph with their own characteristic features. I have seen stables that look like pagodas, grass huts and everything in between. That's all part of the message of Jesus, who came not just for Jewish peasants on a hillside near Bethlehem, but to all people everywhere.

Now Dick Erickson's crèche is very well made, and looks as if it could withstand a harsh Cleveland winter, but do you know, in the middle ages, when wood crafters made these nativity sets, they always put a hole in the roof of the stable. We who are working to patch the holes in the roof of our church and continue to tuck point to keep the elements out, and have plans to re-plaster our beautiful, cathedral-like sanctuary, find it strange that these stables were deliberately built with a hole in the roof, but it is true. The hole, we are told, is a symbol that when Jesus came to Bethlehem's manger, he broke the barrier between earth and heaven, between God and humanity.

During the American Revolution, in the darkest days of the American cause, with George Washington's rag-tag army hunkered down at Valley Forge, morale was at its lowest ebb. The troops had not been paid for many months. Most of them were ill-clothed and ill-fed, freezing to death as they sat there waiting for the winter to pass. The troops were on the verge of mutiny. Then one evening General Washington appeared. He walked up to each tent and engaged in conversation with the miserable, shivering troops. He even took his wool coat and wrapped it around one of the men who had none. He sat by their campfire with them. He talked to them about his plans, his hopes for the successful completion of the war and his vision for the new nation that they were helping to create. It was a great turning point. The troops responded in kind. New life was infused in them. They fought on, and the victory was won.

According to the book of Titus, which is our Epistle lesson this evening, Jesus has appeared among us. He sees what we are going through. He understands that we are in the midst of a struggle, and the struggle is very real. We hear his voice. We sense his presence with us, and that changes everything! Now we know that we are not alone. God is with us, and will never leave us nor forsake us. That gives us the courage and the strength to go on.

The first word of my sermon title is "**Rejoice!**" This short New Testament book of Titus reminds us that tonight "***the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people.***"(2:11) If ever there was a reason to celebrate, that is it! Is there better news than the wonderful word that the barrier between heaven and earth is broken, that God is with us, not only tonight, but every night and every day of our lives!

In the Christmas story, God descends to re-ascend. God comes down at Christmas; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down to humanity. But he comes down to come up again bringing the whole world up with him. According to C.S. Lewis, one might think of a diver, first reducing himself to a wetsuit, then gone with a splash, vanished, rushing down through green and slimy water into black and cold water, down through increasing pressure into the death-like region of ooze and slime and old decay; then up again, back to color and light, his lungs almost bursting, until suddenly he breaks the surface again, holding in his hand the dripping precious thing that he went down to recover.(2) That's what God has done for us in the coming of Jesus. He meets us where we are. Love came down at Christmas. But he doesn't leave us where we are. His coming lifts us up to a new level. We are changed. We are transformed by the power of his love. What a gift God gave to us when he sent Jesus to be with us!

Gift-giving is sometimes a challenge in our family. Is it that way in your family as well? Some people are difficult to buy for. Others are downright impossible! My dad was a very frugal man who never bought anything for himself. He accepted gifts graciously, though reluctantly. If he received a gift, he didn't particularly like or something that he did not want to wear, he never let on. He just thanked us for the gift and put it back in the box. After his death last fall, my sister and I had

the tedious task of going through his closet and his chest of drawers. There were some of the birthday and Christmas gifts that we had given him in recent years: shirts still in the bags with the pins still in them, pajamas still in the wrapper, pen and pencil sets still in the box.

“The grace of God has appeared,” Titus proclaims, **“Bringing salvation to all people.”** Yet it occurs to me on this Christmas Eve that while God’s gift is available to all, while the hole in the roof has forever eliminated the barriers between God and humanity, some of us have never opened the gift! Some of us have never got it out of the box!

And so the second word for tonight is **“Respond!”** God will not force God’s self on anybody. It is up to us to open the gift and to use it --- to live the full, free life that God intends. This Christmas Eve is a good time to ask, “What are we doing with the gift of Jesus Christ in our lives? Have we politely acknowledged his presence, and then put him away in the closet, or is he part of our daily lives?”

God calls us not only to rejoice on this night, but also to respond to his coming by putting Jesus Christ at the center of our lives and making him the focus of every decision, every action, and every intention. Is that a difficult assignment? Of course it is! But with the challenge also comes the ability and the strength and the resources to rise to the occasion. God always gives us what we need in order to be the people God calls us to be.

One of our moms overheard her young teenage daughter on the phone. Now parents aren’t supposed to eavesdrop, but sometimes you just can’t help hearing what is being said. This family, while relatively new to the church is very faithful, and the girl is extremely excited to be part of the youth fellowship. She is so enthusiastic, in fact, that she convinced her best friend to come with her. The conversation her mom overheard went something like this: “I’m glad you enjoyed youth group, but you can’t just come for the fun stuff. If you’re going to be a Christian, you’ve also got to come to church, and you have to pray!” That about sums it up. What this girl told her friend sounds to me like what Bishop William Willimon said recently in a sermon, **“The gifts of God must not be separated from the call of God.”**(3) God justifies us, reaches out to us, and saves us despite our sin. But then God commands us to live new lives, lives without sin, lives that shine as lights to the world.(4) We can’t just acknowledge the gift. We have to get it out of the box and use it!

Rejoice, for the grace of God has appeared! Rejoice tonight, for God is with us. There’s a hole in the roof! The barrier between heaven and earth is broken for good. Respond tonight by living a life that is pleasing to God. Respond to God’s love by beginning right now to live a new life! This is the message of Christmas. This is the word of the Lord.

Notes:

- 1, Hagan, Andrew. *The Clergy Journal*. Sept/Oct.2011, p. 21.
- 2, Lewis, C.S. Quoted in *Pulpit Resource*. Vol. 39. No. 4., p. 56.
3. Willimon, William H., *Pulpit Resource*. Vol. 39. No. 4., p. 54.
4. *Ibid.*