

“Good News is Louder”

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Texts: Isaiah 9:6 and Luke 1: 1-20

In *The Politics of Jesus*, Obery M. Hendricks describes many of the horrors of the Roman occupation of first century Palestine. The emperor Augustus paraded the *Pax Romana*, a propaganda campaign for so-called peace that “was achieved and maintained by horrific political oppression.” For instance, around the time of Jesus’ birth, nearly 2,000 people in the Galilean city of Sepphoris (3 miles from Nazareth) were crucified for rebelling against Roman forces. Obery states, “Similar to the phenomenon of ‘lynchings in the modern era, public crucifixions were intended to strike terror in the hearts of those who were lorded over.” To say there was fear in the land there would be an understatement. That doesn’t even take into account that the purpose of the census mentioned in our gospel lesson today was to increase the taxes on an already impoverished people. When we begin to understand the context of the first Christmas, we can begin to wonder how it was that the good news broke through all of that fear! I submit to you this Christmas that this story proves that good news is louder than fear. Or, if not louder, than stronger.

Let’s get into the story. Right after the information about the census we encounter Mary and Joseph. They are at once all too familiar, and complete strangers to us. “Mary was young, uncertain, and asked to carry more than she could have imagined. Joseph was choosing to show up, even when it costs him reputation and comfort. The shepherds, shaken awake in the night by glory and confusion (Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee).” Their fear was

real; the risk was real. Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee, our partner in this Advent/Christmas series, reminds us that, “The circumstances of Jesus’ birth—poverty, displacement, estrangement, are not erased by the angels’ song. And yet, the good news comes anyway.”

I don’t know if you know much about Greek – as most Americans do not—but Luke uses some very specific language in this story. The angels are no exception. The Greek word for “host” as in “heavenly host” (*stratia*) is military language. Dr. Lee reminds us, “To an occupied people, an army doesn’t usually mean peace.” No wonder the shepherds were afraid. Interestingly, though, the phrase, “do not be afraid” is used perhaps more than any other phrase in our Christmas narratives in Matthew and Luke. It wasn’t just a couple of angels that showed up, but a multitude. An army. What did they pronounce? Don’t be afraid, and behold, we have good news!

The good news comes with sound—loud and full of light. It comes with bodies—angels taking up space in the sky, shepherds running through the streets proclaiming glory, Mary holding pain and promise in her arms. In short, “[Good news] comes through fear, not after it. Luke insists that the good news of God has weight and presence. But it needs to be amplified.”

Speaking of good news, we have more Greek to learn. This time with the help of Michal Beth Dinkler in her commentary on this passage. “The Greek work *euaggelizo* (to preach good news) and *euaggelion* (eu=good+angelos = messenger/angel; gospel) were not originally Christian words. In the Roman Empire, they were often used to describe an imperial conquest or a Roman emperor’s birth as “good news.” Do you see what Luke has

done here? He has used words that often bring with them fear, domination, empire and destruction, and he instead has employed them to speak of the Prince of Peace, and the hope of the world. They are used in the context of terrible fear, but to announce something that no one could have imagined. That shows us the power of language, and that sometimes it's important to understand and re-work words that others have used to destroy, to instead build up. Luke is an expert at this!

You see, “in a world where fear is curated and fed to us, proclaiming good news is a countercultural act.” That is true throughout history. “In a world that tells marginalized communities to be quiet, that punishes joy and rage alike, joy becomes resistance.”

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace...” is not a whisper.

It's a chorus. (Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee)

And yet, the good news ripples outward in quieter ways, too. The shepherds return to the fields glorifying and praising God—they become the first evangelists—the spreaders of good news. They tell anyone who will listen. And the good news spreads—not through Caesar's decrees, but through trembling, joyful witnesses. Tonight, we are invited to do the same. Not because our own fears are gone, but because good news still breaks in.

Even when it's quiet.

Even when it's messy.

Even when it feels like the darkness will never end.

In the words of Dr. Lee, “This is the shape of God's dream: news born in vulnerability, joy proclaimed by the overlooked, power shown not through force, but through flesh. So let us proclaim the good news loudly. Let us make space for joy that shakes the walls. Let us

resist fear's domination by bearing witness to light, to peace, to Christ among us. Because tonight, we remember:

Fear may be loud, but love is louder.

Violence may be strong, but hope is stronger.

And the good news—God is here—will not be silenced.

And don't forget, "God often works beyond the bounds of what we can see, and we might only discover that fact later, from others, as Mary and Joseph did when the shepherds arrived. Still other times, good news will surprise and perhaps even terrify us, appearing when we least expect it, when we're simply going about our days in familiar ways and places, as happened to the shepherds. The *euaggelion*, Luke teaches us, is unpredictable and uncontrollable. It defies expectations. And it's always breaking into the world anew (Miachal Beth Dinkler).

May God's uncontrollable and unpredictable good news break into your heart this Christmas!

Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace.

Merry Christmas! Amen.