

**Sermon for Morning Prayer
Christmas Day**

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the second Verse of the ninth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.²

“The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. Thou hast multiplied the nation, and not increased the joy: they joy before thee according to the joy in harvest, and as men rejoice when they divide the spoil. For thou hast broken the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian. For every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood; but this shall be with burning and fuel of fire. For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke.³

“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus [**SEE-zar Awe-GUSS-tuss**], that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius⁴ [**sigh-REE-knee-uss**] was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and

lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsel-

Thus, too, it was that St. Paul was able to write to St. Titus, in the words of today's Epistle at Mass, that we are "looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity".¹²

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister¹³
December 25, 2008.

¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER x (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² Isaiah 9: 2-7 (KJV).

³ St. Luke 2: 1-20 (KJV).

⁴ Better Quirinius, as the RSV gives it.

⁵ Isaiah 9: 6 (KJV).

⁶ 1 Samuel 17: 12.

⁷ Micah 5: 2.

⁸ Isaiah 9: 6 (KJV).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ St. Luke 2: 10-14 (KJV).

¹² Titus 2: 13-14a (KJV).

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lor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace."⁵

In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

It is hard for us to believe that any good can come out of the central government's interference in the lives of ordinary people, and especially that any good can come out of its ripping the citizens off in order to support its own bloated bureaucracy. So St. Luke's account, that forms today's Second Lesson, is a miraculous reaffirmation that God can use any human evil for His own providential purposes, even the taking of a census that was the thinly-concealed pretext for collecting a poll tax.

For had Caesar Augustus [**SEE-zar Awe-GUSS-tuss**] not called for that particular census and collected that particular tax, Our Lord would have had His human birth in his home town, in Nazareth of Galilee, instead of in Bethlehem of Judea. The little city of Bethlehem was not only associated with King David's royal line and inheritance,⁶ "the throne of David" of which Isaiah spoke in today's First Lesson, but it had also been especially prophesied to be the birthplace the Messiah who was to come.⁷

Truly, "God writes straight with crooked lines". Just imagine how astonished we would be at the notion that the Internal Revenue Service could serve as an agency to further God's plan of salvation!

Theme:

Today, we celebrate the birth of one small child, that took place some two thousand thirteen years ago or so, in a very distant country and into a culture very different from

our own. Despite this distance and these differences, the birth of a child to an expectant family is so natural, so charming, so filled with joy, that we, too, feel something of the happy emotions that Mary and Joseph must have felt on that occasion.

In fact, it is so easy to resonate with those feelings that, lost in the natural human interest of this charming event, we tend to overlook, or at least to give mere lip service to, the deeper theological aspects of this unique happening.

Argument:

“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given”⁸, and we rejoice in the warm comfort in which the miracle of birth always tends to enfold us. Who can see a baby and not smile automatically? Who can think of those little arms and legs waving in the air and not wish to pick the child up? Who can hear its coos and cries and not be tempted to cuddle it?

So we do not pay equal attention to the part about “and the government shall be upon his shoulder”⁹. If we tend to overlook this part about “government”, then it is even more difficult for us to remind ourselves that the “government” of which Isaiah spoke was not a secular political regime, as the Jews of Our Lord’s day assumed it would be, one that would lift “the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor”. Instead, it would be a spiritual, sacramental union between God and His created world, the government not of the powerful but still limited King of Israel or the King of Judea but the rule of the omnipotent King of the Universe.

Isaiah tried to tell us this when he sang of the One Who was to come that “his name shall be called Wonderful,

Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.”¹⁰

This is the schizophrenia of Christmas. It is nearly inconceivable that a real God would deign to stoop down and enter our little world. It is virtually unthinkable – in the literal sense of that over-used phrase – that He would do so by taking on, for a time, the nature, the body, and all the severe restrictions of a helpless, crying baby.

That He would do so is so inconceivable that the pagans who heard of it merely laughed at the silly pretensions of the first Christians: no god who was truly a god would ever humiliate himself or herself by doing any such thing.

Yet this improbability is precisely what our Faith tells us *did* happen: God loves us to such an unimaginable extent that He voluntarily laid aside all His power and foreknowledge, His “omnipotence” and His “omniscience”, in order to accept our petty human limitations. He condescended to experience all the vital phases of our lives, from a real birth, through all the stages of growth, through two decades of adulthood, and finally to a real, and exquisitely painful and protracted death.

We can never think about this in realistic terms, so we certainly can never appreciate even a fraction of its real meaning. We can only accept it, as, again quite literally, an article of Faith, and with St. Luke to sing of it,

“[B]ehold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”¹¹