

WHAT ON EARTH WAS CAESAR AUGUSTUS THINKING? WHY MAKE PEOPLE TRAVEL TO THEIR ANCESTRAL HOME TO REGISTER FOR TAXES? THIS ISN'T SOME WONDERFUL PARTY INVITATION; IT'S SELFISHNESS. THEY COULD ENROLL IN THEIR OWN TOWN. IT'S A LOT EASIER TO MOVE PAPERWORK THAN PEOPLE.

AUGUSTUS IS NO ECONOMIST. HE DOESN'T UNDERSTAND THE DISRUPTION OF PRODUCTIVITY THIS CAUSES. JOSEPH HAS TO CLOSE HIS CARPENTRY SHOP, PACK UP PROVISIONS, AND TAKE HIS PREGNANT WIFE ON AN EXHAUSTING TREK.

JOSEPH IS OBEDIENT TO THE EMPEROR – AND IT'S A GOOD THING, BECAUSE GOD HIMSELF IS BEHIND THIS SILLINESS. IT IS AN EFFECTIVE WAY TO GET THE COUPLE TO BETHLEHEM, WHERE MICAH PROPHESED THE CHRIST WOULD BE BORN.

JOSEPH AND MARY SET OUT OVER THE DUSTY, ROCKY ROADS OF GALILEE, TOWARD BETHLEHEM, THE CITY OF THEIR ANCESTOR, DAVID. IT'S ABOUT EIGHTY MILES, PROBABLY SIX DAYS WALK WITH MARY CARRYING A BABY THAT MIGHT SEE THE LIGHT OF DAY...ANY DAY NOW.

THE JOURNEY IS A GREAT CHANCE FOR THEM TO TALK. THEY HAVE A LOT TO DISCUSS WITH THIS BABY BEING GOD'S SON. THEY GAVE GOD'S ANGEL THE OK, NOT KNOWING WHAT THEY WERE SIGNING UP FOR. THEY DIDN'T ANTICIPATE THIS!

AS THEY DRAW CLOSER TO BETHLEHEM AND TO MARY'S DELIVERY, THEY RECALL MICAH'S PROPHECY ABOUT BETHLEHEM AND BACK OFF ON DISSING CAESAR. IT'S HARD TO TRUST GOD WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS ON US.

MARY RECALLS THE WORDS AFTER THE BETHLEHEM EPHRATHA THING: *THEREFORE HE WILL GIVE ISRAEL UP UNTIL THE TIME WHEN SHE WHO IS IN LABOR GIVES BIRTH; THEN THE REST OF HIS BROTHERS WILL RETURN TO THE FOLD.*

THOSE WORDS PROVIDE A LITTLE COMFORT, BUT, THEY ALSO ADD TO THEIR ANXIETY; THEY DON'T WANT TO BLOW THIS. MARY SEES HERSELF IN SCRIPTURE! ...SO DO WE! WE'RE THE BROTHERS BROUGHT BACK INTO THE FAMILY.

MARY AND JOSEPH REACH BETHLEHEM AND IT'S BURSTING WITH TOURISTS. EVERYONE IS WORRIED ABOUT THEIR OWN NEEDS; NOT UNLIKE OUR CROWDED SHOPPING MALLS. THERE SEEMS NO ROOM FOR US EITHER.

IT'S HUMAN NATURE TO THINK OF OUR OWN COMFORT - EVEN WHEN FINDING A ROOM OR A GIFT FOR THE FAMILY. WE GET NARROW-MINDED IN PURSUIT OF FILLING THAT GAPING HOLE IN OUR LIVES, A VOID PUT THERE BY SIN CENTURIES AGO IN THE GARDEN AND CHISELED OPEN DAILY BY OUR OWN SELFISHNESS. WE FORGET THAT OTHERS AROUND US FEEL LEFT OUT, TOO. WE CAN EVEN TURN CHRISTMAS INTO OUR OWN PARTY – OFTEN A PITY PARTY.

BUT, THIS NIGHT, IN TINY BETHLEHEM, AMONG BEASTS, IN A MINOR CORNER OF CAESAR'S GREAT EMPIRE, MARY AND JOSEPH CELEBRATED THE BIRTHDAY OF JESUS. GOD'S ETERNAL WORD IS NOW FLESH - SKIN-AND-BONES FLESH!

2 NOW, GOD, UNLIKE THE EMPEROR, SENDS OUT HIS INVITATION TO A PARTY. THE ALMIGHTY GOD SENDS HIS ANGELS TO ANNOUNCE AND INVITE LOWLY SHEPHERDS TO HIS SON'S BIRTHDAY PARTY.

...NOT THE SORT OF PEOPLE WE'D INVITE TO A PARTY THIS HOLIDAY SEASON. ...NOT THE SORT THAT ARE INVITED INTO THE PRESENCE OF A KING! ...NOT THE SORT WE EXPECT TO BE GUESTS AT THE LORD GOD'S BIRTHDAY PARTY!

WE DON'T KNOW WHAT ON EARTH CAESAR AUGUSTUS IS THINKING; BUT, WE SURE KNOW WHAT GOD IS THINKING. CAESAR'S CENSUS DECREE CARRIES THE THREAT OF PUNISHMENT; GOD'S MESSAGE BEGINS, *FEAR NOT*.

CAESAR'S DECREE IS THAT EACH MUST GO IN OBEDIENCE. GOD'S MESSENGER BRINGS GLAD TIDINGS OF A SAVIOR WITHOUT A COMMAND TO GO – ONLY AN INVITATION TO SEE THE SIGN OF SWADDLING CLOTHES AND MANGER.

CAESAR DEMANDS THAT TAXES BE GIVEN HIM FROM ALL THE PEOPLE. GOD GIVES ALL PEOPLE GOOD NEWS OF A CHRISTMAS GIFT – HIS OWN SON. THIS IS A PARTY CELEBRATING THE FORGIVENESS OF SIN, THE END OF DEATH...PEACE TO FILL THAT DAMNED HOLE IN OUR LIVES.

CAESAR'S LEGIONS OF WARRIORS, CLAD IN THEIR BRIGHT CRIMSON CAPES AND SHINY POLISHED ARMOR, TERRIFY THE WORLD WITH THEIR ABILITY TO WAGE WAR ON THE DISOBEDIENT. GOD'S HEAVENLY ARMY, LIGHTING UP THE SKY, OFFERS THE WORLD AN ETERNAL MESSAGE OF PEACE.

AN ANGEL SAYS: YOU'LL FIND A BABY, AND THEY CERTAINLY DID. - THE ONE MICAH PROMISED WOULD REUNITE GOD'S FAITHFUL. - THE ONE OF WHOM PAUL WROTE: HE WILL SAVE US BY THE SPIRIT'S WASHING OF RENEWAL. WE ARE HEIRS OF ETERNAL LIFE BECAUSE WE'RE BAPTIZED INTO JESUS. WE ARE JUSTIFIED BY HIS GRACE. NO WONDER WE STILL REMEMBER HIS BIRTHDAY.

THE SHEPHERDS KNEEL BY THE MANGER AND SEE THE NEWBORN SHEPHERD WHO WILL LAY DOWN HIS LIFE FOR THE SHEEP. HE WILL SHEPHERD HIS FLOCK IN THE LORD'S STRENGTH, MAJESTY, AND NAME. THEY WILL DWELL SECURE, FOR HE WILL BE GREAT TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH AND HE WILL BE THEIR PEACE.

YOU'VE BEEN INVITED TO THE PARTY! YOU KNOW THE PEACE OF CHRISTMAS. THAT ABYSS IN YOU THAT FALLS FOR ALL THE PROMISES OF CAESAR AND TRIES TO FIND CONTENTMENT IN OBEDIENCE TO THE WORLD, IS CLEANED OUT REGULARLY BY GOD'S WORD AND SACRAMENTS. YOU ARE FILLED AGAIN AND AGAIN BY GRACE.

THE WORD OF THE LORD MAKES BELIEVERS OUT OF THE SHEPHERDS, URGING THEM INTO THE PRESENCE OF THE LIVING GOD. THIS SAME WORD MAKES BELIEVERS OUT OF US AND INVITES US INTO THE PRESENCE OF GOD. (TABLE)

IF YOU HAVE CHRISTMAS PEACE, HANGING OUT IN A STABLE; YOU ARE GOING TO BE KNOCKED OVER DIZZY WHEN YOU JOIN THE EVERLASTING PARTY! YOU'LL BE HANGING WITH THE ANGELS AS THEY SING CONCERTS AND KNEELING AT THE THRONE OF YOUR FATHER, ONLY TO BE LIFTED UP AND HUGGED WITH PURE LOVE.

3 YOU'LL BE **SITTING** AT A **TABLE** ENJOYING THE **FINEST** WINE AND **BEST** STEAK **EVER!** AND, THE **MEAL** WON'T HOLD A **STABLE** CANDLE TO THE **JOY** THAT WILL **REVERBERATE** THROUGH YOUR **WHOLE** BEING AS YOU LOOK **ACROSS** THE **TABLE** INTO THE **EYES** OF **JESUS**, SMILING HIS **PERFECT** RIGHT THROUGH YOUR **HEART**.

THE **HOLY** SPIRIT, WHO **BROUGHT** YOU INTO THIS **GLORY** THROUGH **FAITH** IN **GOD'S** **WORD** MADE **FLESH**, WILL **FINALLY** SO **FILL** THAT **HOLE** IN YOUR **LIFE** THAT **NOTHING** BUT **WONDERFUL** **CARESSES** YOUR **FEELINGS**.

THAT'S **REALLY** WHAT MAKES OUR **TIME** WITH **MARY** AND **JOSEPH** AND THE **SHEPHERDS** SO **SATISFYING**. THIS **JESUS**, WHO'S **BIRTHDAY** WE **CELEBRATE** MAKES HIMSELF **SMALL** ENOUGH FOR **US** TO **HOLD** AND **LOVE**, SO WE CAN **TRUST** THAT **WE** WILL BE **HELD** IN HIS **ETERNAL** **ARMS** **FOREVER**.

JOSEPH **PULLS** BACK THE **SWADDLING** CLOTHS AND COUNTS **TEN** FINGERS AND **TEN** **TOES**. AS **MARY** **WRAPS** HIM BACK IN SHE'S **STRUCK** BY THE **PEACE** IN HIS **EYES**. THEY **LOOK** AT EACH OTHER AND SAY: *HE'S* **PERFECT**. THEY HAD **NO** IDEA.

THE **SILLINESS** OF A **GOVERNMENT** DECREE AND THE **INSANITY** OF LAYING THE **LORD** IN A **MANGER**, IS ONE **WAY** **GOD** GUIDES YOU THROUGH A **WORLD** THAT CAN BE **SO** **FRUSTRATING** AND **UNFAIR**. COME TO **THINK** OF IT, AS **MUCH** AS YOU **FRUSTRATE** **GOD**, IT SEEMS **UNFAIR** THAT YOU'RE **INVITED** TO THE **FAMILY** PARTY.

CHRISTMAS REMINDS YOU **AGAIN** THAT **GOD** IS NOT ONLY **WITH** YOU, YOU'RE IN HIS **PLANS**. SO, **KEEP** THE **FAITH**, **RECOGNIZE** THE **WORLD'S** **LIES**, AND **HIT** YOUR **PILLOW** **EVERY** NIGHT IN THE **PEACE** WHICH **SURPASSES** **UNDERSTANDING**.

MERRY CHRISTMAS – HAPPY BIRTHDAY JESUS!