

REAL WORLD  
*A sermon for Christmas Eve*  
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First Presbyterian Church  
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Luke 2:8-20

What were they talking about that night? At the palace of Caesar Augustus in far-off Rome, they were talking about the census. It was a massive undertaking to count every person in the Roman Empire, but emperors like to know how many subjects they have. They've got to keep things under control after all—keep the peace, preserve the status quo, that sort of thing. Besides, once you know how many people you've got, you know the size of your tax base.

At the inn in Bethlehem they're trying to decide who's going to sleep where. The place is packed to the gills. They even turned away a couple who knocked on the door a little while ago, sent them out to the stable. She looked like she was about ready to give birth, too. Too bad.

Those are important things, crucial things. That's the real world, the world we live in—taxes, government, inflation. If we're going to live in the real world, we've got to pay attention to those things.

Luke mentions those things in his gospel—the Roman census, the overcrowding in the Bethlehem inn. But he hardly seems interested in them at all. Luke is much more concerned that we know about the baby that was born that night to the woman and her husband who had been turned away from the inn. Luke wants us to know about some extraordinary things that happened to a bunch of shepherds on a hillside outside of town.

Now, babies are cute, but they are hardly newsworthy. And shepherds in that day didn't have the best reputation in the world, not much point in paying attention to them. But Luke wants us to know that what happened in that stable that night, and what the

shepherds heard on that hillside, were in fact more important than the things that happened in the overcrowded inn of Bethlehem, or even the things that happened in the palace of Caesar Augustus. The real world, according to Luke, is found here.

And here we are, come this night to the manger at Bethlehem. In here are soft lights and soft carols. Out there is a dark and threatening world. Out there is war, war fought by American young people among others. Out there is a jittery stock market and an uncertain economic atmosphere. Out there is the Internal Revenue Service, putting the final touches on its mailing to each of us this week with tax forms to contend with.

Christmas itself seems only to add to the stresses—the credit card pulled out too often, the events to attend, the trips to the airport. A few years ago I was there at the Nashville airport, meeting a family member flying in for the holidays. The short-term parking was jammed, as you might imagine. After driving around for awhile, I finally spotted an empty spot down the next row. But another car, coming from the opposite direction, spotted it at the same time, so we arrived before this precious spot simultaneously. I motioned for him to go ahead and take the spot, and he did it! I thought he would motion back to me—no, you take it. But he just pulled right in. Not only did I not appreciate his chutzpa, but the incident put me in a foul mood which was made all the worse when the parking spot I finally found was what seemed to be several miles from the airport. That's the real world, right?

We might think that what we do here is just a momentary break from all that—a few moments of quiet and candles and songs before heading back into the real world. It almost seems unreal here, like a trip to Disney World, a break from the real demands of life. We know, we're tough because we've got to be. We'll enjoy this now, but soon it's back to the real world and its demands.

Luke wants us to see just the opposite. This, he says, is the real world, and it gives us a window on all the rest. What we do here puts all the rest—the disagreements and cynicism and hard work—in perspective. We see everything in a new way, because we come again before the manger.

We see it in those shepherds. I wonder what they were talking about that night to pass the time? "I hear that the price of wool has fallen, and some of us might get laid off. (And one thinks: I hope it's Josiah over there instead of me.) . . . Things aren't going too well at my house. All the ol' lady does is nag. It's easier to put up with these sheep than to be home with her. . . . The Romans are on our necks again. What about that new tax

they're charging. How are we going to make ends meet?" Not too different, in a way, from the issues that still confront us today.

And in an instant it is all changed. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them. And before you know it those shepherds were headed into town on a mission they had not planned, visiting a baby they had not previously known. And when they returned, they were glorifying and praising God.

The other things—the taxes, the high prices, the problems at home—had not gone away. But now those shepherds have seen a new reality, a greater reality. Things can never quite be the same for them again.

It can be that way for us as well, you know. "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord." A Savior. It changes everything. What we do here this night gives a way to see all of life in a new way. What we do here this night is the most real thing we do, and everything else comes from it.

Our word "holiday" is a corruption of the words "holy day." That's what the holidays are, a time to remember the holy, a time to see again that all our days are holy. If we can see it, and take it to ourselves, then it can make us a little more kind, a little more gracious, a little more loving. The holy days can make us a little slower to speak the negative word. And in its place, these holy days can transform all our days, so that all our days can come to be days where we love and care for each other.

And long after the presents are opened and the turkey consumed, after the decorations are taken down and the tree is gone, long after when the cold days of January stretch out before us, we remember what we have done here. Long after all of that, the reality of Christmas—its joy and love and peace—can rule our hearts.

What's real, the Christmas cheer or the worldly despair, the soft carols or the snarl of anger, the cynicism or the joy? We look at our world and see the pain and hurt and problems. God looks at our world and sees a world worth being born into, a world worth dying for.

He's among us now, friends, the babe in the manger, the Savior on the cross, the Lord risen from the dead. And nothing in life or death is ever the same again. ✠