

Sermon: They Went with Haste

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

26 December 2021

Based on **Isaiah 62:6-12; Luke 2:1-7, 8-20**

**Introduction:** We've come a long way since the beginning of Advent, traveling backwards through the end times to get here, the day after Christmas. It feels as if we've missed something, so we stayed with the usual readings for Christmas Day, rather than those for the first Sunday after Christmas.

Today's passage from Isaiah is usually read on Christmas Day because an anonymous prophet proclaims the hope for a peaceful future, which Christians believe comes through the birth of Jesus. It's a perfect fit for the reading from Luke.

**Trouble in the text:** One thing we ought to remember as we read the Gospels, especially Mark and Luke, is the underlying political nature of these writings. Everything from the titles used for Jesus to Mary's name, even the reason for going to Bethlehem, had meaning.

In today's reading, in a single verse, Luke writes that 'to you is born this day' a Savior, Messiah, and the Lord, all in one person, in Bethlehem, the City of David, the legendary king of Israel.

In the first century Roman world, the titles *Savior* and *Lord* were reserved for the emperor, for Caesar. And *Messiah* is a term loaded with meaning for Jews, so Luke is putting everyone on notice about this birth. He even manages to redefine the *good news*.

Then there's Mary, whose very name might have attracted attention. A scholar named Elizabeth Johnson pointed out that Mary's name is 'unambiguously political, brave, and restive.' Many first century Jews named their daughters after the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, and in memory of a woman named Mariamne, the murdered wife of Herod the Great.<sup>1</sup>

We used the KJV for the first part of the Gospel reading because it better conveys why Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem – to pay their taxes. And Luke does a good job telling us when all this took place, 'when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.'

Cyrenius enjoyed a ‘difficult and slippery’ career – he was governor of Syria twice and served in every Roman province in the region, sometimes for just a year or two, with several different titles.

Back then, no one would ask, what year is it? Because no one knew the year the way we do today. They wouldn’t say, ‘four’ but they might say, it’s the third year in the reign of Caesar Augustus. Luke was precise in telling us when this all happened, but we’ve dropped that thread, forcing us to make a rough guess.

So, this is the backdrop to the story. It’s all there, waiting for us to hear it.

**Grace in the text:** We’ve talked about how the Gospel writers appropriated the prophets to make sense of what they knew about Jesus. In this case, Jesus’ birth confirms Micah, who wrote that from Bethlehem shall come forth one who is to rule in Israel (5:2).

It’s also another example of how God gets things done: Mary and Joseph never would have made that trip if Caesar had not decreed that *all the world* should be taxed.

And when I first read that Mary treasured all *these words*, I wondered, what words? No one has said anything to Mary. So, naturally, I checked.

In a literal translation, Luke wrote, “But Mary was keeping in mind *all these things*, pondering them” in her heart. Now that makes sense. From the moment the angel Gabriel came to her to announce her special role in world history, Mary has had a lot to think about, and now, with her newborn son asleep in the manger, she had time to do so. And that is our cue to do the same.

**Trouble in our world:** When you are in relationship with God, there are no days off, yet the prophet calls on us to ‘remind the LORD’ – why? God knows everything. Most of us would say we’re too busy to remind ourselves to even get the car inspected, or renew our driver’s license, let alone remind God about who knows what.

And in reminding God, the prophet calls us to *take* no rest and to give *God* no rest until God delivers on a past promise. This seems like pretty heavy stuff.

We have no idea what people thought of this when it was first proclaimed, but to our modern ears, pestering God sounds a little dangerous. It’s not really what we do these days. On the contrary, we tend to lie low and let God be God at a safe distance.

So, what’s he getting at, this unknown prophet? Maybe he means for us to pray, to remind God that we care. If we want to make God’s kingdom here on earth, we must

be partners with God, daily reminding God that we're willing to work, to observe the signs and act on them, that we're not just sitting back and waiting for it to happen.

An old story: A traveler arrives at a roadside inn late at night and asks for a room. Sorry, the innkeeper says, but the inn is full. The traveler protests that it's bitterly cold outside. That may be, the innkeeper replies, but safety rules prohibit the inn from going over capacity. The traveler thinks a minute and then asks a question. What if the Queen of England were to walk through the door this minute hoping to stay overnight—wouldn't the innkeeper find a room for her? Of course, the innkeeper concedes, he would rustle up something under those circumstances. "Well, I've got news for you," the traveler says. "The Queen of England isn't going to walk through the door. So why not give me the room you would have given her?"<sup>2</sup>

We live by rules. If the queen showed up, the innkeeper would change the rule. Not so when Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem. With nowhere else to put him, Mary laid Jesus in a manger, a food trough, foreshadowing Jesus as the bread of life.

**Grace in our world:** The shepherds, living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night, were surrounded by God's heavenly glory. It overwhelmed them, so much so that the angel told them to be not afraid.

And the shepherds *heard* the good news, decided to *go and see*, to experience the truth for themselves; they made a decision to move toward Jesus, and they went not to give but to take in this thing that had happened, to absorb it, and to worship and praise God because the ultimate shepherd had been born in Bethlehem.

And they went *with haste*, they wanted to get there, just as Mary had gone in haste to see her kins woman Elizabeth.

Karl Barth wrote a book about the different aspects of Christmas. In it, he wrote, 'The Christmas story itself might pose the question for us: "Has not God Himself prepared us to listen and have we not already heard the message, while we are still asking if and how we can hear it?"'<sup>3</sup>

Amen.

\* \* \* \* \*

---

<sup>1</sup> Green, J. B., Long, T. G., Powery, L. A., & Rigby, C. L. (2018). Luke 2:1-14 (15-20). In *Connections, a lectionary commentary for preaching and worship* (first, Vol. 1, p. 76). essay, Westminster John Knox Press.

<sup>2</sup> ‘The Rule of Laws’ Review: Codes of Conduct, review by Andrew Stark  
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-rule-of-laws-review-legal-history-rights-codes-of-conduct-11639757646>, accessed 23 December 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Barth (1886-1968), “Hearing the Christmas Message: 1928,” in *Christmas*, trans. Bernhard Citron (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1959), 26.