

When the Empire Strikes First

Luke 2: 1-14

The second chapter of Luke has always been near and dear to my heart. In my house, at Christmastime, my mother took out her Bible, placed it in a stand (used only for this occasion) and opened it to Luke chapter two. She graced the stand with holly and ivy and placed two candles beside it. I remember reading those words over and over again as a child. I was struck by the majesty and drama of those opening lines and all that follows: “*In those days a decree when out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. . . .*” The birth of Jesus takes place within the larger context of imperial decrees, where ordinary people are going about living their ordinary lives, like the shepherds. After struggling through Greek at seminary, I learned that those shepherds weren’t just “sore afraid,” as the Authorized Version put it. It was more like - *and they were filled with very much great fear!* Here - language is stretched to its limits to exhaust this epiphany. They were terrified by this encounter with Yahweh’s messenger: “*To you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord.*” And if that wasn’t enough, a whole legion of angels offered their deafening chorus of praise, “*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.*”

Luke wrote his gospel right under the nose of Caesar. With passion and freedom, Luke preached the liberating power of Jesus Christ to his community pressed down by the political and military forces of the Roman Empire. He was courageous – some might say, foolish – to take on Roman imperial power. He had no choice. His encounter with the Risen Christ compelled him to act and act decisively in a way that was unpopular and even illegal. We see the effects of Luke’s experience of liberation found throughout the gospel. And later in Acts, his twin-work, empowered by the fire of the Holy Spirit, Luke gives testimony to another power, a greater power at work in the world, appearing weak yet containing a strength and determination to undo every force in the universe that seeks to oppress and dehumanize God’s people. It’s a power at work to restore God’s *shalom* so that it might be on earth as it is in heaven. Luke is a political-theologian. He wants us to know what he has come to know: in the face of Jesus Christ we see clearly and completely that God is concerned about the *polis*, the city, the place *where* people live. God is also distressed by the *way* people live and is bent on doing something about it - because Caesar cannot, because Caesar has no power.

The political nature of Luke’s gospel became all the more apparent recently when I discovered that Luke’s birth narrative is actually modeled after official decrees of the Roman Empire.¹ There is a monument in Ankara, the capital city of Galatia, with the following inscription written by Caesar Augustus: “When I defeated my enemies, I spared the citizens who pleaded mercy. . . Foreign nations that could be pardoned without peril I chose to save rather than destroy.”² The highest benefactions a ruler can bestow was the decision to be merciful and to save. This is why Caesar was considered *sōtēr* - savior. In Luke’s time, the title *sōtēr* was given to the Roman emperors and public benefactors of lesser prestige. Around the birthdays of

¹See Frederick W. Danker, *Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), pp. 6ff.

²Quoted in Danker, p. 6.

the Caesars it was not uncommon for various regions of the empire to offer official decrees celebrating the goodness of Caesar, praising him as liberator and restorer. For the birthday of Caesar Augustus, the Proconsul Paulus Fabius Maximus claimed that, “He restored everything that was collapsing and heading for chaos; and he gave a fresh appearance to all the whole world, which was most willing to accept complete dissolution.”³ Another decree referred to Caesar Augustus’ birth as a divine gift, which “has filled him with noble concern for the welfare of all humanity, and has sent him to us and to those who come after us as a Savior who will put an end to war and set everything in order.”⁴ Luke and his hearers would have been familiar with these decrees.

Here we see just how *courageous* and *radical* Luke really was. Luke was a political-theologian (and so were Matthew, Mark, and John). For far too long the church has depoliticized the gospels to our detriment. It is with these ears that we must hear Luke’s birth narrative. Luke ascribes to *Jesus* the function of the emperor.

Jesus is the true Benefactor of all benefactors, not Caesar.

Jesus tends to the needs of his people, not Caesar.

Jesus is the true savior, not Caesar.

Jesus – and only Jesus – as savior has the power to bring the peace of God, not Caesar. Jesus does not offer peace achieved by imperial violence (which is not really peace), but – as we learn throughout the rest of the gospel and into Acts – the peace that is given through healing, liberation, compassion, and table fellowship.⁵ Being a disciple of Jesus Christ puts him at odds with the way of the empire.

I might have known all of this when I was at preacher’s school, but it didn’t register – until now. Not in the same way, until now in the living of these days when nation is lifting up sword against nation and the rhetoric of religion and politics are being whirled around us day and night, as Christians and the Church catholic struggle with this war, as we struggle with what it means to be an American, and more importantly, what it means to be a *Christian*. Luke might have something to teach us here.

Whether we are in favor of this war or not, whether we think it just or unjust, we have to admit, it seems to me, that last Wednesday evening the United States crossed the Rubicon and entered into a new age, we entered into a new world. Speaking with Charlie Rose last Monday evening, the noted author Jonathan Schell said that our preemptive war against Iraq will signal that the United States, like Rome, has moved from republic to empire and like Rome (and every

³Quoted in Danker, p. 7.

⁴Quoted in Danker, p. 7.

⁵I am grateful to Dr. Michael Gorman of St. Mary’s Ecumenical Institute (Baltimore, MD) for drawing my attention to these central themes in Luke and providing a copy of Danker’s commentary.

empire that ever existed) we run the risk of losing everything.⁶ Schell is not alone in this assessment. “American imperialism” has often been the charge of the far left,” Robert Bellah, leading sociologist of American religion, observes. “But now even those on the right are talking about the new age of the American Empire,” he says.⁷ A historian once remarked that Britain acquired its empire in “a fit of absence of mind.”⁸ Like Britannia, which originally didn’t seek to “rule the waves,” they woke up one morning with a vast empire, so too, America finds itself as the leader of a world empire.⁹ We have awoken from our post-Cold War slumber as the most powerful nation in the world. Never has the world witnessed such enormous commercial, political, and military power. Power is not bad. It’s what you do with the power that matters.

Last summer, the Bush Administration released a document titled, “The National Security Strategy.” This document marks a fundamental shift in American foreign policy, introducing the doctrine of preemption - a doctrine that undermines Christian Just War Theory, that goes back to Augustine (396-430), a policy which has sparked considerable contentious debate within the church. There was some coverage of it in the media, NPR did a feature story; but it was largely ignored (most America was probably worrying about the stock market). It’s this document that spells out the way of empire. It can be summarized in this way: America will strike any nation or any group that it deems dangerous, whenever and however it feels necessary, and regardless of provocation or lack thereof. America invites allies to join in these ventures but reserves the right to act with or without allies. No nation will be allowed to surpass or even equal American military power, and indeed other nations are advised to limit or destroy any “weapons of mass destruction” they may have, and that includes Russia, China, and India.¹⁰ Isn’t this the language of empire? “The great struggle of the 20th century between liberty and totalitarianism ended with a decisive victory for the forces of freedom – and a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise.”¹¹ The goal is to universalize this model by creating a

⁶See also Jonathan Schell’s essay, “No More Unto the Breach, Part Two: The unconquerable world,” in the recent issue of *Harper’s* (April 2003), pp. 41ff.

⁷Robert N. Bellah, “Righteous Empire: Imperialism, American-Style,” in *Christian Century* (March 8, 2003), p. 20.

⁸Comment made by Michael Ignatieff in the *New York Times Magazine* (January 5, 2003), cited by Bellah, p. 20.

⁹The point recently argued by the Oxford historian Niall Ferguson in *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003). This work is the companion volume to Ferguson’s television series on the history of the British Empire. There is considerable denial in the United States that America has entered into an age of empire (it is “the empire that dare not speak its name,” as he puts it).

¹⁰Summarized by Bellah, p. 20.

¹¹Cited by Theodore R. Weber in “Power Play: The new ‘National Security Strategy,’” in *Christian Century* (March 8, 2003), p. 26. See also Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The*

new *Pax Americana*.

What we are learning now is that an earlier model of this document was written in 1992, prepared in the Department of Defense under then Secretary Richard Cheney. Another form of this policy was issued in September 2000 by the Project for the New American Century with the publication of a paper titled, “Rebuilding America’s Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century.” Who were some of the other authors? Democrats and Republicans alike, but in particular Richard Perle, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, among others (One was, also, Frank Kagan, the historian, whose editorial appeared in *The Washington Post* last Tuesday calling the President to reinstate the draft because of the impending threat of war with North Korea). Their vision had very little support until September 11th – when everything changed and the world became scarier.¹² Will North Korea be next? I’m sure Iran is not happy with the fact that the United States has troops in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

I hope – I really do hope – we will win the peace and be liberators, that we will use our power responsibly (But, I have my doubts. That’s just my perspective.) This week, I heard of an Iraqi citizen who was near the market area that we mistakenly bombed (There’s some question whether or not the Coalition was to blame). He was holding the severed hand of a victim, waving it in the air at the journalist asking and screaming, “Is this the work of a liberator? Is this American democracy?”

If it is true that we have entered into an Imperial Age, then the church will have to struggle as it did in the time of Luke in figuring out how to be faithful to Christ in a new age of empire.¹³ Power is not bad. It’s what we do with the power that matters. The potential for good is here. But so is the potential for terrible destruction.

We live in a new world. Therefore, what will be the role of the church in the *Pax Americana* if peace is achieved primarily through violence? What does it mean to be the church of Jesus Christ in this violent age of “shock and awe”? We cannot afford to be silent. Friends of mine, both in and out of the church, my age, have wondered why the churches have been so silent about this war, why have clergy have been so reluctant to speak out? Look at Peter Steinfeld’s biting indictment of religious leaders in *The New York Times* last Saturday (March 23, 2003).

Realities and Consequences of U. S. Diplomacy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

¹²See Gary Dorrien, “Axis of One: The ‘unipolarist’ agenda,” in *Christian Century* (March 8, 2003), p. 300. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* have also recently published extensive reports analyzing they key players in creating American foreign policy.

¹³NOTE: I am *not* saying that Bush is Caesar. Caesar represents the embodiment of power. In the United States, obviously, power is not lodged in one person. I’m simply raising the question of what is the role of the Christian in this new age of empire – or any empire – when we understand *God’s* power at work in what Paul called a power made perfect in weakness.

Polls indicate that religious leaders have played little or no influence in shaping America's view of this war, just slightly above Hollywood celebrities. And then to speak out we run the risk of seeming un-American, not supporting our troops. A distinction has to be made between the troops and the policy that sent them there. And for far too long, Christianity and citizenship have been inextricably linked.¹⁴ There is a difference. What are we so afraid of? Being unpopular? Losing members? Afraid of conflict? The answer is, *YES!* to all of the above. These are questions I ask myself and struggle with.

And yet, as a disciple of Christ, it is incumbent upon us to speak - to speak *a different word of hope and healing*. We are called to offer a different vision. We are called to provide a more perfect way. *Luke calls the church to be as courageous and radical – and maybe even as foolish in the eyes of the world – as the one whose lowly birth transformed our understanding of God, ourselves and the world. In this new world the church has something invaluable to say and we must be able to say it.*

But before we attempt to speak for the Holy One, we need to be still and we need to be silent and we need to listen. We need to pray and wait for the whirlwind of the Holy Spirit to sweep upon us. *Veni, Creator Spiritus* was an ancient petition of the church. *Come, Creator Spirit*. More than ever, this needs to be our petition today. Because it's only the Holy Spirit, continuing the work of Christ, who has the power to redeem our imaginations to find an alternative to war, who will show us how to engage the powers and be peacemakers. In the living of these days, we need to be in prayer – a whole lot of prayer – *first*, as followers of Christ, and then *second* as Americans. Perhaps the United States and the world need us to be Christians *first* and patriots *second*,

because only then will we have something to offer greater than ourselves,
only then will we have something to offer greater than nationalistic pride,
only then will we have something greater to offer than empire.
Lord, may it be so.

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27th March 2003 for Baltimore Presbytery

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¹⁴See the editorial written by Reverend Fritz Ritsch, pastor of Bethesda Presbyterian Church, "Of God, and Man, in the Oval Office," *The Washington Post* (March 2, 2003)