

There is an old joke about a Jewish lady who was stranded late one night at a fashionable resort on Cape Cod. The resort did not admit Jews. But, being stranded she inquired at the front desk for a room. The clerk pretended to look down at his book and said, "Sorry, no room. The hotel is full." The Jewish lady said, "But your sign says that you have vacancies." The desk clerk stammered and then said curtly, "You know that we do not admit Jews. Now if you will try the other side of town..."

The Jewish lady stiffened and said, "I'll have you know that I converted to your religion."

The desk clerk said, "Oh, yeah let me give you a little test. How was Jesus born?"

She replied, "He was born to a virgin named Mary in a little town called Bethlehem."

"Very good" said the clerk. "Tell me more."

"He was born in a manger."

"That's right," said the clerk, "And why was he born in a manger?"

She replied loudly, "Because a jerk like you in the hotel wouldn't give a Jewish lady a room for the night!"

Interestingly the real Christmas story is about people going where they should not go. In fact, from one perspective it's about a whole invasion. Our gospel reading starts off with words you know well, "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria."

The gospel writer Luke is doing more than just rooting the birth of Jesus into historical reality. He's also making fun of the two guys mentioned there: Emperor Augustus and Governor Quirinius. Have you ever watched a congressional hearing about some wrongdoing? You see these well dressed executives with sweat on their brows being interrogated by lawmakers about their mistakes and misdeeds. Well Emperor Augustus and Governor Quirinius would have some serious questions to answer. How and why did they allow such a serious invasion of Roman territory to occur?

There were two invasions that first Christmas night. Jesus, the newborn king, is the obvious one, and we'll return to him. But then there's the other invasion - the heavenly host.

Usually artists depict this heavenly host as angels with wings and halos lighting up the night sky, perhaps carrying harps or hymnals and singing glorious songs. But that is not what the Bible describes. The "heavenly host" is actually the army of heaven. They have just made a full scale invasion deep into the heart of the great Roman Empire, and no one knew they were coming. No one in the Roman army told Augustus or Quirinius an invasion was imminent. No one in the Roman spy network or business community or even the public works department alerted the leaders that a vast and powerful army had entered the country. They weren't armed with harps and hymnals. This is an army of immense power armed for battle.

And they didn't make a little sortie into enemy territory just to prove a point, or to pass through to invade another country. No, they came to place their own new king in power. A Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord was coming to rule the

world. Augustus and Quirinius had no acceptable excuse for missing such a threat, and yet they missed it.

I've preached before that Luke's gospel isn't just a story about Jesus. It is a highly dangerous political document written for the intention of undermining the Roman empire and its economic system. Even the Christmas story makes jabs and barbs at the Roman leadership.

Calling Jesus the "Savior" is rare in the gospels. Savior was commonly used of the Roman Emperor. The term "Messiah" or "Christ" means the anointed one, or the anointed ruler, like a king. And of course "Lord" is an obvious reference to political power. It's pretty clear that a new ruler has arrived in Roman territory.

And it gets almost comical when you realize how Luke is picking up on political rhetoric of his day and applying it to the birth of Jesus in a tongue-in-cheek way. For example, here's an excerpt from the explanation the provincial assembly of Asia wrote when it proposed beginning the new year on Caesar

Augustus's birthday (the same guy we read about in our gospel reading).

"Whereas the providence which divinely ordered our lives created with zeal and munificence the most perfect good for our lives by producing Augustus... sending us and those after us a savior who put an end to war and established all good things; and whereas Caesar when he appeared exceeded the hope of all who had anticipated good tidings...; and whereas the birthday of the god marked for the world the beginning of good tidings through is coming..." and on and on. (cited by Joel Green in the New International Commentary, pg. 133)

Sometimes we take these words at the beginning of the Christmas story very seriously, but we forget that they are tongue in cheek. Luke is mocking the political rhetoric of the day when he applies it to Jesus. He is mocking the political power because, of course, real power has come to the world in Jesus. Good tidings, peace, and favor are real, not just political words.

Jesus' coming was a threat to the Romans, although with all their might they could do nothing about it. It wasn't the

invasion of the heavenly host that they missed. It was the entrance of an even more powerful force, the force of the God of love. Let me conclude with Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson's Christmas reflection:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all.

(Titus 2:11)

Yes In this world where God creates with deep beauty and profound mystery.

In this world where so many yearn for God's healing and peace.
In this world where some have thought God has forsaken us:

Yes Here, in this world, the grace of God has appeared.
Not just in this world but for you.

Yes For you, weary from trying to meet the expectations of others.
For you, worrying about an uncertain future.
For you, wondering if you are worthy.

Yes For you, the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation.
Not just for you but for all.

Yes For all, salvation has come in the wonder of God
in mercy bending low to meet us in our humanity.
In the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection.
In the power and promise of the gospel's proclamation,

God's goodness and loving-kindness has appeared
in the Savior Jesus.

So with angelic messengers and witnessing shepherds,
we raise our voices:

"Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

Amen