

O little island of Crete

By [G. Kevin Baker](#)

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So who is actually on the Revised Common Lectionary committee, and why do they have us visiting the island of Crete when everyone knows the focus should be on the little town of Bethlehem? Sure, there is some Christmas-like language in Paul's letter to Titus: "salvation for all," "waiting for blessed hope," "manifestation of glory" and all that. But most of the letter is a bit of a Christmas downer; it feels like the Grinch trying to steal Christmas by inserting words and behavior that frustrate goodwill and holiday cheer, turning our minds to consider theft, greed, grumbling and sin.

Chronologically, the happenings in Crete follow the happenings in Bethlehem, but just for kicks, it might be fun to work our way backwards from the island to the manger to see what illumination Paul's words to Titus might shed on the angels' message to shepherds.

Imagine the difficulty and frustration of Pastor Titus's ministry in Crete—what it might be like to be left behind on an island full of fractious, stubborn and unruly people, and to have been told to build up and strengthen a Christian community against all odds. Paul's charge to Titus [implies](#) a laundry list of challenges followed by a frank and shocking [assessment](#) of what Titus was up against:

"Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons." That testimony is true. For this reason rebuke them sharply, so that they may become sound in the faith.

Ouch. The phrase "behaving like a Cretan" no doubt traces its origins to this text. (Apologies to contemporary residents of Crete!)

How is that for a challenging mission for a new pastor? What possible good could Titus do in the midst of so many others hellbent on doing the opposite?

In truth, nothing; nothing, that is, apart from the [grace of God](#) that alone can bring salvation, train new Christians to renounce impiety and worldly passions and purify an entire people from their iniquity through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In other words, God can do on Crete what God is intent on doing everywhere else: save human beings from their sin and rebellion and empower them to live lives that are “self-controlled, upright, and godly.” This is what God is up to in the mystery of the incarnation, and we should not let all the holiday trappings of Christmas cause us to forget it. Christ came into the world in order to redeem it. Just in case we skip over that part in our rush to open gifts, Luke [brings us](#) back down to earth, literally:

A decree went out from Emperor Augustus....and the first registration was taken while Quirinius was governor.

It is an odd way to start a birthday story. But these details are more than historical window dressing. The beginning to this story—this first verse in the birth narrative—actually strikes a theme that will be repeated over and over again in Luke’s Gospel and in his sequel, Acts. Luke reminds all of us that Jesus’ birth took place *in the world*; it happened in real time among real people. Jesus was born amidst the ordinary human backdrop of political leaders with political agendas; people going to work in nearby fields; families seeking shelter for the night and citizens busy paying taxes, eating, sleeping and traveling.

Imagine for a moment what it might be like to come into a world full of fractious, stubborn and unruly people—people like you and me. This is the world God so loved that he sent his only son. This is the world Jesus came to live in, laugh in and love in; the world he came to heal and save. It’s the world we, like Pastor Titus, are called to live, laugh, love and serve in, proclaiming the “good news of great joy for all people” that has come to us whether we live in Crete, Bethlehem or (in my case) North Carolina.