

The news that matters

While the Romans were broadcasting fake news about the emperor as savior, God was at work elsewhere.

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I've been trying, without much success, to make sense out of this troubling season in our national life.

The trouble has bipartisan (multi-partisan!) sources, but, candidly, my greatest bafflement is about the meaning of Donald Trump's election for who we are and where we're headed.

I've watched my favorite talking heads on *Morning Joe*; read E. J. Dionne, David Brooks, and Eugene Robinson; listened to the *Democracy Now* and *On Being* podcasts; and re-read Martha Nussbaum on political emotions.

More importantly, though, I've tried to remember and to trust that we are not subject to the principalities and powers; instead, we're part of God's glad order of justice, mercy, peace, and love.

The Christmas story tells us that Jesus was born in the shadow of the Roman emperor. Caesar Augustus had unrivaled military power and unequalled wealth, which enabled him to impose an uneasy and acquiescent peace on his far-flung territory, the kind of peace which prevails when oppressed people can't rise up against their oppressors.

The political propaganda machine churned out the message that the emperor was the world's great savior. On one of his birthdays, the Roman Senate sent this announcement through Augustus' vast empire: "The birthday of the god has marked the beginning of good news through him for the whole world."

Luke's Gospel says that the emperor issued an edict which put Mary and Joseph on the road and made them vagrants on the night their son was born. Though Augustus had them on the road, God was quietly up to something that eyes blinded by power could not see and ears deafened by fake news could not hear: God was coming to earth to live with human beings, to love us, and to save us.

An angel announced the news, not to anyone who had power, but to a band of shepherds:

Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

The angel subversively declared that Jesus was the good news, not Augustus. The gospel was not the emperor in his grand palace; it was the baby in a borrowed manger.

The vanquishing power of empire would give way to the saving humility of God's reign. That's why the angel said: "Do not be afraid."

We don't have to be in thrall to principalities and powers. Those who seem to be in charge aren't.

There's a lot of unsettling news these days, but the liberating truth shines from Bethlehem.

Love is always being born among us.

Justice will prevail.

Peace will take the place of violence.

Great joy will come to everyone, everywhere.

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