

A Tale of Two Gods

Christmas Day {1680} St. Barnabas Episcopal Church

December 25, 2009 [1647R] Florissant, Missouri

TEXT: Luke 2:1-20

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If I were to give a title to Luke's story about the birth of Jesus, I would call it a "Tale of Two Gods." The God who is at the center of Luke's story, of course, is the Father of the baby boy born to Mary. The evangelist is telling us his version of how the only God who really matters entered human history incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth.

But Luke wants us to know there is another god in this story. He mentions him in the very first sentence. This god is the Emperor Augustus. "Augustus" means "the divine one." The Roman Empire gave that title to Octavian, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, after he defeated Mark Antony at the battle of Actium. That victory concluded a civil war that had embroiled the Mediterranean world ever since Caesar's assassination thirteen years before. Because he restored peace to the empire, the Romans truly believed that Augustus was divine. According to coins, inscriptions, and temples found all over the empire from that time, Augustus was proclaimed to be "son of god," "god," "god made manifest," "lord of the whole world," and "savior of the world."

If Augustus was going to save the world, he was going to do it the same way he saved the empire from civil war—astride a white horse leading armies into battle. Augustus was a god of the clenched fist, governing the empire with the instruments of coercion. After all, his decree forced Mary and Joseph, who lived half a world away, to go to Bethlehem.

But there was a human benefit to all of this. Caesar Augustus's reign began the famous "Pax Romana" that kept a huge part of the world peacefully open to all kinds of commerce for over a century. Of course, it did that by violently eradicating any rival kings or local rebels who disrupted that peace, and by oppressing the peasantry of the world from Egypt to England.

In his book, *Engaging the Powers*,¹ Walter Wink persuasively argues that we still worship gods like Augustus. Many of us believe that only a God who will use intimidating force can protect the world from the persistent power of evil. We are so fearful of evil and so thirsty for revenge against those we think have done evil that we look for God to violently subdue them. That is the appeal of the "*Left Behind*" books which anticipate that God will get it right the next time he comes. The authors believe God can crush evil only with staggering force in a bloody conflict. To date the publishers have sold over 65 million books in this series, testifying to the fact that even many Christians believe that God must use violence or the threat of violence to get his way.

Luke's aim in this story of Jesus' birth is to reveal to his readers that the true God—the only God we can genuinely trust—is not that kind of God. His Son is not born in a palace to a king as

befits a god of the fist. He is born in a barn to homeless, peasant parents. This God does not summon members of the ruling elite to a king's court to pay homage to the new heir. He calls the lowest of the low—shepherds—to visit a humble barn to rejoice in the birth of his Son and their Savior. But God does not use a human courier to inform the shepherds that his Son is born. He sends angels, whose announcement declares that this baby boy is heir to the kingdom of heaven: "to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." Luke made sure the angels' words deliberately echo the titles Romans used for the emperor-gods to indicate to the shepherds, and everyone who reads Luke's story, that this baby is truly what the emperor-gods could only pretend to be.

In coming to earth in this way the only God who matters began to reveal the power he was going to use to save the world—the power of love. Recall your feelings as you remember the story. Don't you find love leaping in your heart over any new born baby, especially when the baby is God's? Don't you feel compassion for the holy family as they are being ordered about by the imperial authority and rendered homeless in Bethlehem? Don't you rejoice for the lowly shepherds, the underdogs of the world, when they are chosen to hear the good news first? And to go beyond tonight's gospel, don't you feel the harrowing pain of Bethlehem when you hear the story of how Herod killed all the babies in that village hoping to get rid of Jesus.

Your feelings are the physical and tangible expression of a power that is more mighty, enduring, and fundamental than any other power on earth. They are sacraments of the power of love. Love has the power to create a community of all sorts and conditions of people who use loving means to bring compassion, justice and peace to their corner of the world. In churches like that God's kingdom becomes more and more visible on earth, prompting more and more people to become its citizens and live by its values. That's how the true God saves the world.

God became incarnate as Mary's little baby boy so that we might have faith in the power of love rather than the power of the fist. Most of the world—including many Christians, it seems—trust the coercive power of emperors, kings, generals, and politicians rather than the alluring power of God's love revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. I hope that today's celebration of the incarnation of God in a little baby will remind all of us to trust God's love instead of the forces of intimidation. After all, today we are not celebrating Augustus's birthday, but the birthday of Mary's little baby boy. And that ought to be evidence of whose power is greater.

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¹ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, (Minneapolis; Augsburg Fortress, 1992), chapter 1, pp. 13-31.