



[Pastor Keith GeRue](#)

*Sermon for Advent 4
December 21, 2016*

Luke 2

The *Quempas Carol*, upon which this year's Children's series is based, dates back to the Middle Ages, evidently arising in Bohemia. It is actually three different hymns that are sung together almost accidentally. The action in it is portrayed by groups of singers who rotate around the church while singing. This carol has the strong feeling of a great deal of activity, portraying all the coming and going that attended our Lord's birth: overwhelmed shepherds, westward proceeding sages, holy family, and resounding angels. Tonight we hear of the whole reason for this carol and for Christmas.

Sing with Mary, virgin mother; Praise her Son, our newborn brother;

Angel ranks, lead one another, Hailing him in holy joy!

God's own Son is born a child;

God the Father is reconciled!

We will hear tonight of the decree of Caesar Augustus, that there was no place in the inn, that the angels pointed to an animal's trough, and that the shepherds couldn't keep quiet about what they had seen and heard.

Verses 1–5

And there was a decree from Caesar Augustus.

What is a decree? We seldom hear of such things today. Modern governments no longer issue decrees. The word smacks of authoritarianism and oppression. We don't want anyone telling us what to do, especially when it has to do with tax law. Stay out of my pocketbook, please! But our government does issue decrees. We call them laws or omnibus spending bills, perhaps hoping that people won't notice that they amount to the same thing as decrees. *Things haven't changed much, have they?* The only difference being that you can pay your taxes online rather than walk to your distant family homes as happened with Mary and Joseph. The first Christmas came surrounded by the world with its laws, requirements, and decrees, also not unlike our own.

We find ourselves obeying the requirements of this season as though they were the very decrees of Caesar Augustus. Go to the mall, buy and wrap presents, put up and decorate the Christmas tree, pick out just the right ham for Christmas dinner, and on it goes. Perhaps, you're already feeling like a decree from Caesar Augustus might be easier than what you've gone through so far preparing for Christmas. The external requirements our culture forces on us are relentless laws, decrees, even dogmas that you dare not violate. And if you do, if you aren't full of eggnog and good cheer, if you aren't having a **"holly jolly Christmas"** then God help you, you've ruined Christmas. Caesar Augustus is looking better and better.

But if we deceive ourselves into thinking that Christmas is about obedience to the decrees of our culture, we shall miss entirely the message God wants us to receive from the incarnation and birth of his Son. Christmas must not become what we do, or we shall miss the most important gift, Christ himself. We will be like the frantic family searching through bags of shredded wrapping paper looking for the diamond ring father bought mother this year for Christmas. The most valuable gift, small as it is, can be lost in all the clutter and trappings.



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Through his family, Jesus born of Mary obeys the decree of Caesar Augustus. His obedience is not an example for us as much as it is a fulfillment. What comes to us from Caesar is a decree. What comes to us from God the Father is his Son. Man demands. God gives the perfect gift. The defining character of the Church's teaching is God's self-giving in Christ. It is not dogmas and decrees, it is not cultural requirements. We in the Church will leave all of that to Caesar. Heavenly gifts we will leave to God's obtaining: **"God's own Son is born a child; God the Father is reconciled!"**

Verses 6–7

And there was no place for them.

There was no place for the child to be born. But it wasn't as though Joseph had forgotten to get a reservation at the Bethlehem Holiday Inn. This wasn't a failure of Travelocity or a mistake made by a travel agent. The people of Bethlehem were not merely exceptionally inhospitable by refusing to open their homes to the needy couple. It isn't as though if there had been a Star of Hope Mission in Bethlehem, all of this **"no-room-in-the-inn"** business wouldn't have happened.

No, there was no place for him because there never is any place for him in the world. Neither our hearts nor homes are open to a God so radical as to be born a human child for us sinners in a world where there is no place for him. But our God is tenaciously gracious. And so born he was, born where there was no place for him.

So stubbornly does God love us that he allows his Son to come even where his Son is hated, rejected, persecuted, and finally done to death on the cross. This is so that he can come for you and I, who are sinners, a persecutor or slanderer, an adulterer, a gossip. So stubbornly does God love us that he sends his Son to be one of us, to be our newborn brother: flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone. All this he does even when there is no place for Christ. Christ comes into the world that considers him to have no place, to be out of place. His goal is to be with those who have been displaced, those out of place, those whose place remembers them no more. He gives a place to those whose place has been taken. **"He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble"** (Luke 1:52). So sings **"Mary, virgin mother; Praise her Son, our newborn brother."** **"God's own Son is born a child; God the Father is reconciled!"**

Verses 8–14

There has been born for you today a Savior.

We are amazed that God would send his angel host to lowly shepherds. They were outcasts from the culture of the day, ceremonially unclean. When Luke tells us they were living outdoors, he uses the word that implies that they were rustics, simple herders, people we would call country bumpkins. Like the child born in Bethlehem, there was no place for them either.

And what an exalted proclamation, what an exciting announcement came to them that night. **"Today . . . a Savior has been born to you"** (v. 11). Mark these words. The angel tells them to stop being



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afraid and then tells them why: “**A Savior has been born to you.**” He is born for you. He’s humble, meek, and lowly for you. He takes on human flesh to take up our sin. How wondrous that God first reveals the most important birth ever to these most lowly shepherds, mere country bumpkins. *And the message!?* How shocking—“**for you.**”

God does not send his Son born of a virgin into the world for his own sake. God has no need to see the world, which he created, up close and personal. The only need here is our own. Our desperate weakness, wickedness, and sin drive God to come among us close in human flesh and to announce that birth to those so humble that the message exalts them, so homeless that it gives them a mansion, so downtrodden that it gives them unspeakable joy, so fear ridden that it gives them courage. Oh, that we too understood ourselves to be just so humble, just so homeless, just so downtrodden, just so fear ridden that we could experience that same joy. Tonight let us listen as we hear:

“Angel ranks, lead one another, Hailing him in holy joy! God’s own Son is born a child; God the Father is reconciled!”

Verses 15–20

They kept on saying to one another, “let’s go.”

They had no doubt what they would see when they went. The Lord had told them. The whole matter was laid out for them. The signs were humble enough. But they were the right ones for humble shepherds. They had gone from terror in the presence of God’s angels, their eyes fearful of seeing, to confident insistence that the thing had to be seen. They had gone from being sure that they would die to being sure that they would see the One who would die for them.

So they went immediately and with great impatience to see the child laid in the rough feeding trough of an animal. They didn’t go back to town to get cleaned up and put on clothes. There was no need for them to put on their best clothing to impress this child. *Was he not laid where animals once had been kept? Was he not in a stall that even now stank of sheep and goats, just as they did? Would the child in the manger notice that they smelled like the manger?* Of course not. He was come for such as them. It’s no wonder they couldn’t stop talking about it. It’s no wonder they hurried off to see this thing. If one among them had been a child, all the way there he would’ve asked, “**Are we there yet? Are we there yet?**”—so impatient were they.

It is a great shame to us that when he comes among us in our day by humble preaching and sacraments in the stone trough of the Church, all we can say is “**Aaww, do we have to?**” If we only saw what the shepherds saw. If we only heard what the shepherds heard. But we have over and over again. God’s own Son has come down and the angels have proclaimed it to us every year for the last two thousand. They still come to us and say, “**A Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord**” (Luke 2:11). And when we hear the message, let’s keep on saying to one another, “**let’s go**”; let’s keep on saying, “**Heav’nly gifts for us obtaining, Raise your hymns of homage high!**” “**God’s own Son is born a child; God the Father is reconciled!**”



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In the name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen