



# Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Watertown, WI

## **“An Emperor and an Infant”**

Rev. David K. Groth

*“In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the World should be registered . . . and all went to be registered, each to his own town” (Luke 2:1).*

**December 25, 2012**

### **Collect of the Day**

Most merciful God, You gave Your eternal Word to become incarnate of the pure Virgin. Grant Your people grace to put away fleshly lusts, that they may be ready for Your visitation; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.” His real name was Octavian, and he was adopted by Julius Caesar and named his heir. Octavian (Caesar Augustus) reigned from 31BC to 14 AD. Historians say he was unusually handsome, with bright eyes and hair that was slightly curly and inclining to golden. They also say he had a unibrow. By many measures he was one of the greatest emperors. When he began his reign, the empire was on the verge of collapse having suffered almost a century worth of assassinations, riots, coups and civil wars. With a firm hand he brought order out of that chaos. He ordered the execution of hundreds of enemies, and also eliminated piracy on the Mediterranean Sea and turned it into a peaceful Roman lake. He was ruthless in the early years, but later seems to have mellowed with age. His rule marked the beginning of nearly 200 years of peace called the Pax Romana. He once said, “I found Rome a city of bricks and I left it a city of marble”. By the way, the month of August in the Roman calendar was once named Sextilis but in 8 BC it was renamed August in honor of Caesar Augustus.

This is the guy who’s ordering a census of the entire Roman world. It stretches from the southern half of Britain in the northwest down to Egypt in the southeast, and from what is today Portugal and Spain in the west, across 2400 miles of Mediterranean to include Syria and Judea and Mesopotamia. It’s an enormous chunk of the earth which today contains

nearly 50 independent countries, but 2000 years ago it was just the one Roman Empire. Can you imagine the logistics of pulling off a census of this area? But they did. In fact, at the end of his life in 14 AD, Caesar Augustus wrote a list of 35 “Acts of Augustus”, things he accomplished and of which he was proud. The census made the list.

The census interrupts a lot of lives including that of Joseph and Mary who have to travel from Nazareth down to Bethlehem, the town of his ancestry. So Caesar and his census played a very small role in this whole drama. Maybe you can even see how God used Caesar, played him like a fiddle without his knowledge or consent, so that the ancient prophesy would be fulfilled and Jesus would be born in Bethlehem.

In any event, the birth of God’s Son did not take place in the Roman Emperor’s lavish palace in Rome. It took place 1400 miles to the east in a shed behind a roadside inn. I picture it as some kind of lean to, but archaeologists say it might have been a cave. Either way there’s dust and cobwebs everywhere, mice droppings and barnyard muck. We romanticize it, but who really wants to give birth in a barn? I’m sure Joseph feels just horrible about it, and is so apologetic, but Luke doesn’t say anything about that. He only writes, “She gave birth to a son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.” Even in Bethlehem, no one really knows who Joseph, Mary and Jesus are and what great thing has just happened.

Let’s think about this for a moment. Joseph and Mary and the infant were pushed off to the side of a small town that was itself off to the side of a Roman province that was itself off to the side of the Empire. This means Almighty God came into the world practically unnoticed by the world. He did not come with a trumpet blast and with unfathomable power and glory that cannot be ignored. No one really knows who Jesus is yet. But the angels know, and they announce it

to some local shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night. “Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” Had it not been for the angels spilling the news to the shepherds, no one would really have known what took place, so quiet and humble is the entrance of the Son of God!

When the UW football team is introduced it is preceded by music being blasted over the house speakers, at a volume I suspect is on the far edge of what’s legal, and the band plays “On Wisconsin” and the crowd cheers and claps. When the celebrities arrive at the Kodak theater for the 2013 Academy Awards, there will be the standard red carpet treatment, cameras flashing, sequins sparkling, crowds cheering. When the president walks into the room a band plays the “Presidential March”. But when God’s Son is born on earth, he doesn’t look like much, and so no one much notices.

I wonder what the protocol was for when Caesar Augustus entered a room. It was Augustus, after all, who laid the framework for the emperors being worshipped as deities, as gods. It began early. In 27 BC, just a few years into his reign, the Roman Senate conferred on Octavian the title “Augustus” which means “the exalted one.” Augustus ate it up, and for good measure added the title, “Pontifex Maximus” meaning, “the highest priest” which was printed on the Roman coins bearing his image. Roman citizens started worshiping the emperors, and the emperors started persecuting those who wouldn’t play along, especially Jews and Christians.

Think of the irony here. In the palace in Rome we have a grown man demanding the world treat him like a god, but in a cattle stall in Bethlehem we have the true God in the infant Jesus sleeping contentedly and anonymously. In Rome we have one who will persecute those who refuse to bow down and worship him. In Bethlehem, we have Jesus whom the world can reject if it wants . . . not because Jesus doesn’t care about them,

but because he treats them with dignity and respect and gives them that freedom. He will not force himself on anyone. In Rome, Caesar Augustus wraps himself in the finest cloth known to man and is protected by his palace guards. In Bethlehem the infant is wrapped in simple swaddling cloths, to keep him warm and snug, but also to protect his vulnerable little limbs from being accidentally bent the wrong way. In Rome, Augustus crooks his finger and gives an order, people start moving. It might be a couple traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be counted, or an army moving from Gaul to Britain to pick a fight. In Bethlehem, Jesus is in no position to give any orders. The Word Incarnate cannot yet say any words. In Rome, Augustus has men and women attending to his every whim. He is a law unto himself, and feels accountable to no one. But Jesus lives under the Law and is accountable for everyone's sin. As Paul writes, "When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal. 4:4-5). In Rome, we have a man who could be ruthless. In Bethlehem, we have God's Son who is vulnerable, but also merciful and gracious and good and kind. When you're with an emperor, you never touch him. (Similarly, when Michelle Obama lightly touched the queen's back, the British twittered with indignation.) And you never turn your back on royalty. You first walk backwards a few steps with your head slightly bowed and then you depart. But back in Bethlehem, can you picture with me a donkey sniffing at the infant, stealing a quick lick with the tongue?

The birth of Jesus was such a quiet and humble event. He did not come marching in through the front door, flexing his muscles, demanding our attention. He could have, but he didn't. "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given." That's how the Lord of hosts came among us then and that's how he comes to us today, and that's Good News!

2000 years ago the Lord came into the lives of insignificant and common people. That's good news for you and me, for in the grand scheme of things we are also insignificant and common people to everyone but him. He comes into our lives because our lives are precious to him.

2000 years ago, God came into a village that was small and unimportant. That's good news for you and me, because Watertown can seem pretty small and unimportant. Yet God promised, "Where just two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst." And so he comes into our city and into our homes and into this church.

2000 years ago, God was born in a manger, a musty, dusty place that occasionally smelled to high heaven. That's good news for you and me, because not everything about our lives is clean and lily white. In fact, sometimes our lives, our sin can smell to high heaven too. We are quite unworthy to offer him hospitality, but he promised, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (Jn. 14:23).

2000 years ago, God made his home with a menagerie of creatures and critters, some rightfully so because the shed was built for them, others, like mice, are more or less trespassing, just trying to survive. And the Lord of Hosts is not too proud to make his home with them too.

2000 years ago, the Lord did not barge in or force his way into our lives, nor does he do that today. No thundering voice from the heavens, no flashy miracles to startle us out of our lethargy or indifference, no promise to speak to us through signs and wonders, through visions or dreams, or coincidences. But God has promised to speak to you through his Word, and that word most often comes to us quietly. In 1 Kings 19, the Word of the Lord was not in the strong wind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire. It was in the still small voice.

The way God was born into the world is the way

God usually chooses to work in the world today. He masks his glory and dwells within the humble, the ordinary: Water. Bread. Wine. Word.

Born in a cattle stall, filthy and rundown, (they're always run down aren't they?) perhaps even on the verge of collapse. Born also into filthy and rundown lives (they're always a bit run down aren't they), perhaps lives even on the verge of collapse. Born quietly through Word and Sacrament. Born to cleanse us. Born to rescue us. Born to forgive us and make us new.

One last thing: Caesar Augustus was once the most powerful man in the world. But he's dead and gone now. When he died, they burned his body into ashes as was the custom, and placed those ashes in an urn, and the urn into a mausoleum. You can still see the mausoleum outside of Rome, though the bricks are weathered and it's overrun with weeds. In 410 AD, Visigoths sacked Rome, broke into everything, including the mausoleum, stole the golden urns, and scattered the dust of Augustus and his family. No one worships Augustus anymore and if they do they are the most to be pitied, because there's nothing Augustus can do for anyone.

But that one born in a cattle stall in Bethlehem and placed in a manger, that one crucified, died and buried, that one rose again and lives yet today, and sits at the right hand of God but continues to work through humble means, there's nothing he cannot do for you. Amen.

**GOOD SHEPHERD LUTHERAN CHURCH**

[www.goodshepherdwi.org](http://www.goodshepherdwi.org)

1611 East Main Street

Watertown, WI 53094