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ADVENT 2 - December 9

Baruch 5:1-9 Philippians 1:3-11

Luke 3:1-6

### How Political was Luke?

Luke's gospel is an extraordinarily political one. Over and over, the writer mentions the names of people in power, referencing their eras, areas of governance and even some of their policies.

The readings for the past two weeks have been filled with warnings about signs of the times. Now, rather than talking about signs, Luke's gospel text drops us into the actual events, describing in detail the political landscape of the times. Even a casual acquaintance with the gospel texts brings some familiarity with the complicated dynamics of conflict in the politics of the day — names such as Herod, Pilate, Judea, Pharisees, Scribes, Samaria, Syrophonicia, Gentile, Rome, all trip off the tongue, even though our knowledge about these geographies, groups and geopolitical realities might be patchy.

For the purposes of clarity about how comfortable Luke's gospel is in detailing political conflict, here follows some political history. Obviously these are broad brushstrokes. For detailed reading, you will find the books and links in the further reading section (below) helpful. A quick warning — you might want a pot of fortifying tea (or whatever your brew of choice is); you'll need it.

About 60 years before the birth of Christ, Rome conquered Jerusalem, and "Herod the Great" — from Samaria — was installed as a Client King. The fact that this role was a Samaritan one meant that the role was more familiar with Judean practices and religion than the Romans were, yet still distant enough for Roman manipulation. This Herod (there are a number of Herods, all Client Kings of the Roman Empire) expanded the temple in Jerusalem through heavy taxation and was complicit in the

ongoing subjugation of the Jews in Jerusalem and Galilee.

The emperor at the time was Caesar Augustus. He lived from 63BCE to 15CE, and reigned from 44BCE. He was called the 'Son of God' and 'Saviour of the world' and songs were sung about how he'd 'bring peace'. These names are already alerting us to the political potency at the heart of Mary's Magnificat (but more about that particular political piece of subversive hymnody on the fourth week of Advent). Zechariah's song, too, uses images from Exodus while prophesying how we will be saved from our enemies (1:71, 73) and those salty prophets, Simeon and Anna also have the cessation of foreign occupancy and subjection in their hopes. The political context of Luke's gospel is continued through the narrative of the Centurion 7:1–10), and even Jesus predicts the destruction of Jerusalem by opposing armies (21:20–24)

Luke's reference to Quirinius (although problematic in that it implies that Jesus birth was post 6AD whereas Herod the great died in 4BC, meaning that Mary's & Elizabeth's pregnancies could not overlap) is a clear obvious reference to that census being an occasion for a rebellion led by Judas of Galilee from which came the Zealot movement. That Acts 5:37 mentions Judas the Galilean's revolt in connection with the census indicates the associations that were in the evangelist's mind. All of these political references locate the emerging story of God's saving love amidst the reality of political chaos.

Back to Caesar Augustus... He oversaw the aftermath of Herod the Great, who died in 4CE. On Herod the Great's death, the Emperor Augustus honoured the terms of Herod's will, placing his son Herod Archelaus over Judea, Samaria, and Idumea to 6 CE. This region was referred to — by the Romans — as "The Tetrarchy of Judea". However, at the request of the Jewish and Samaritan delegations, the Romans deposed Archelaus, made border changes, and created the "Iudaea province." This enlarged province was ruled

by a prefect (one of whom was Pilate) until the year 41. From 6–66 there were governors of the Judean province. Pilate was Prefect of Judea, 26–36.

So Herod's son Archelaus was out, but Herod had had three other sons, some of whom are mentioned in this Sunday's gospel reading. Herod Antipas was tetrarch of Peraea and Galilee to 39 CE; and his brother Philip ruled areas both to the north and the east of the Jordan river. All of this indicates a step-down in power and authority from that which Herod the Great had held. Tetrarch basically means "a petty prince" — a title which was little more than a plaything for reputation; albeit one that made the lives of some people miserable.

Luke's mention of Lysanias is obscure — and has puzzled biblical historians. To be sure, there was a Lysanias, but he died in 36BCE. Others argue that Luke is making reference to the Lysanias mentioned by Josephus, and still others argue that Luke is saying who he thinks should have been ruler at the time, rather than who was installed at the time.

Luke mentions the High Priests too. The High Priests were another "in between" role. They came from among the Jewish people, but were appointed by Roman authorities. Annas served as High Priest from the year 6CE to 15. He was young — only 36 by the end of his time as High Priest. Yet he remained an important political character, aided by his five sons and his son-in-law Caiaphas (also mentioned in this gospel text).

(Interestingly, Annas and Caiaphas continue to be political actors in the life of Jesus in the writings of Luke, as well as in those of Matthew and John. — see Matt 26:3, 57; John 11:49, 18:13, 24, 28; Acts 4:6)

Back to Caesar Augustus — remember him? High-heejin of the Roman Empire. He died in 15CE he was succeeded by Tiberias Caesar, under whose reign Jesus was abducted and executed. The Herod of that era is portrayed somewhat passively (23:6–12) because by that stage, Judea is under Pilate — whose bloodthirsty character has been established (13:1). Jesus, a

Galilean, who is making his way through the towns and villages (13:22) to Jerusalem must know that Jerusalem is not a safe place for Galileans.

Even this brief hop, skip and a jump through the political landscape of Luke's gospel demonstrates the fact that the evangelist locates Jesus firmly within the context of contested territory, temporal powers, political machinations, despotic leadership and disputes about the rightful kings. That the gospel progresses in a political vein, moving towards the execution of Jesus as a pretender to the throne (23:2-5, 38) confirm to us that political reality is at the heart of the gospel of Luke, not a mere backdrop. The words of Zechariah's song — that Jesus is set for the "rise and the fall of many in Israel" — and Mary's song — casting the mighty from thrones — each lay the foundation for a profoundly politically engaged gospel manuscript, a manuscript that sees

the fall of an Empire, and the glorious inclusion of all in a universal song of salvation that will go from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.



## Christmas Time in New York

**ENJOY THE LITTLE THINGS IN LIFE. ONE DAY YOU'LL REALIZE THEY WERE THE BIG THINGS.**

**-Church Sign in NY**

Way more than politics and religion, my family's passionate holiday fights revolve around food. Specifically, the battle lines are drawn over whether marshmallows or brown sugar and pecans are the best topping for the always wondrous sweet potato casserole.

I, myself, am a brown sugar/pecan warrior, while other, lesser beings in my family, believe that white sticky goo should be used as a

topping. And so, every year, there's a stand-off. Eyes narrow, arms fold, and the fight begins.

When you think about it, the actual casserole conflict is pretty lame. Both toppings are sugary, both will put you into a diabetic coma with equal speed, and both—in the end —make a great casserole. Surely, somewhere in all this goodness, there has to be a happy medium. There's too much yumminess here to waste on petty infighting.

Sadly, the infighting in our nation is much like my family's sweet potato feud: tragically polarized. It's like the San Andreas fault has jumped out of California and embedded itself in the hearts of the American people.

We're right; they're wrong. End of story.

Our national perspective is like a greeting card I saw recently that depicted two ladies from the 1950's smoking cigarettes, one saying to the other, "All I know is one of us is right . . . And the other is you."

That is American down to the ground.

What if we come at our conflicts in a different way? What if, instead of a direct marshmallow/brown sugar pecan throw down, we use the wisdom of St. Francis, who said, "Let me not seek as much. . . to be understood as to understand?"

Conflict resolution experts call this interest-based negotiation; meaning that you focus on why the issue is important to the other side, rather than the rightness or wrongness of your respective positions. By identifying shared values, you find common ground, and it is from that place of commonality that solutions more easily flow.

If I apply this to my family's great marshmallow debate, I quickly see that our shared value is our delight in sweets. We're just fighting over which ingredients can best lead us to that shared value.

Our political issues can be approached in the same way. In almost every conflict, there is **common ground**. For example, we all want a better world for our children, fair and equal treatment for our citizens, protection from terrorism, and clean air and water. We're just fighting over how we get there.

Maybe this Christmas holiday, we can consider a new recipe. For our wondrous sweet potato casserole, how about a sugary topping of all three ingredients: marshmallow, brown sugar AND pecans? Or half brown sugar/pecan and half marshmallow? Or how about we use neither and top the sweet potatoes with Cap'n Crunch?

So, too, let us consider a new recipe for this nation—our wondrous casserole of ethnicities, races, and religions. We need a fresh approach that focuses our commonalities and then finds a way to combine our needs, hopes, and dreams into a dish that feeds us all.

America has too much to offer, too many blessings, and too rich a history to be brought down by petty infighting. Partisan politics have no place in a nation where all are created equal. Let's celebrate this year by acknowledging our commonalities and giving thanks for what we share as a family of Americans. Surely, somewhere in all this goodness, there has to be a happy medium.

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## Traditional Midnight

**Christmas Eve Service:** North Shore in New Baltimore with Pastor Randy.

