

Ten days ago I went to see the new Star Wars movie. For two-and-a-half hours I could forget the problems of this world and escape into an alternate world. I could see characters I've been following for more than 40 years. I could immerse myself in a story from "a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away." It was escapism at its best.

We live in a troubling world. It's been a crazy year. Terrorist attacks and mass killings. Political divisions and increasing polarization. Nazis marching by torchlight through an American city. Crazy dictators developing nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. There is much that is disturbing in our world.

Thus at times it's good for us to escape into the world of a movie, or TV series, or book, or sporting event, or concert, or video game. Too much attention on the problems of the world can lead us into downward spirals of depression or fatigue. We can't ruminate on all the problems of life and all the problems of our world 24/7.

Maybe that's why we look forward so much to Christmas. For just a little while, we can escape the problems of the real world, and hear again familiar and comforting words. We need tidings of comfort and joy.

But I would suggest to you this evening that the tidings of comfort and joy we celebrate at Christmas are not about escapism. These are not tidings of temporary comfort or fleeting joy. Christmas is about something more, something deeper, something real.

More than 2,000 years ago, there was an event in history. The birth of a man. Many thought this man to be the son of god, and later they thought of him as god himself. His coming was called "Good News."¹ They called him "savior of the whole world." They called him lord. They said that his coming ushered in a new order, a new era of peace on earth. They called him "prince of peace." They even said that the world should change its calendar so that a new era would begin based on the date of his nativity.²

And that man, of course, was named... Caesar Augustus!

Now, you may not know much about Caesar Augustus except that the month of August is named after him. Or you may only know him because Luke mentions him at the beginning of the 2nd chapter of his Gospel which we read every Christmas, "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus..."

But this is so important. By mentioning Caesar Augustus in the Christmas story, Luke reminds us that the birth of Jesus happens in the real world and in the real-world context of the Roman Empire of Caesar Augustus. Christmas is not escapism. The birth of Jesus Christ is set smack-dab in a real world with real geo-politics.

And in Luke's world, people would associate all these words with Caesar Augustus: lord, savior, son of god, gospel and good news, prince of peace.

¹ Priene inscription, Paullus Fabius Maximus, "In Praise of Caesar" circa 9 AD

² Priene inscription, First Decree of the Asian League

Briefly, these are some facts about Augustus. His uncle, Julius Caesar, adopted him as his son, and when Julius was declared to be a Roman god, that made Augustus the son of a god. Augustus was hailed as the savior of Rome who ended 100 years of varying degrees of civil war. Augustus ushered in a new era of peace that lasted for centuries, the Pax Romana.

Yet there was a dark side to the peace brought by Caesar Augustus. Caesar's peace was a peace of absolutism and dictatorship. It was a peace enforced by an imperial army at the point of a sword. It was a peace maintained by butchery and brutality. Citizens traded in their civil rights for security. They were kept busy by a succession of building projects and rituals and holidays and games. People were kept so busy by numerous activities that they had little time to notice that the facade of peace was kept in place by a reign of terror. That was the deeper reality of the peace brought by Caesar Augustus.

And yet, one night, in Caesar's police state, something extraordinary happened. This occurrence was in the last place you'd expect something important to happen. In a remote corner of the Roman Empire, a young woman gave birth to a Son. Not in an imperial palace, but in a stable. Not amidst buildings of marble, but amidst the smells of manure. And the only people who probably saw baby come into the world were his parents: a humble carpenter and his young fiancée. No other human eyes probably witnessed this birth.

His birth was unnoticed by the rest citizens of the Roman Empire. Caesar Augustus would live for another couple of decades, but he would have probably never heard anything of Jesus' birth. It was completely off of his imperial radar screen.

And yet, there were other eyes watching that night. Caesar and his army may not have known what was happening. But God's army certainly did.

And here's where we miss the power of what Luke is telling us. We gloss right over Luke's account of God's army appearing to the shepherds.

First one angel appears to the shepherds. The shepherds are terrified. The angel's appearance must be awe-inspiring. So the angel has to tell the shepherds, "Do not be afraid."

Then the angel proclaims good news of great joy. A real savior has been born. Not Caesar Augustus. But a true savior. A true prince of peace. And he is not born in some kind of escapist never-never land. The angel tells the shepherds, "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

Today shepherds. Right over there shepherds, in Bethlehem. This is how you can recognize him shepherds, he's wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger. He's a real baby in a real place in the real world.

And then God's army makes its appearance. And we miss this in most our English translations.

Our translation we heard for our Gospel reading tonight said, "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host."

Today, we assume "host" means a whole big bunch. But when the Bible was first translated into English, "host" commonly meant army. And the Greek word³ that Luke uses certainly means army. And a few new translations are now using that term. Instead of "a multitude of the heavenly host" one translation says, "a vast host... of the armies of heaven."⁴ Another says, "a great assembly of the heavenly forces."⁵ Another says, "a crowd of the heavenly armies."⁶

It's not a choir of angels. Luke never uses that word. They're not described as singing. Luke doesn't use that word either.

Instead, they're described as shouting out God's praise, saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!"

This is not so much a song. This is the battle cry of God's heavenly army. Caesar brings peace at the point of sword. But God brings true peace through his son. And the angelic army hails him as the rightful and only true king.

So maybe we shouldn't picture the angels as some serene choir of singers. We shouldn't think of them in choir robes playing harps of gold. Instead, maybe our mental picture should be something like the Scottish army in the movie, *Braveheart*. They stand there behind William Wallace. And they shout out their defiance toward the opposing British army.

That's what we've got here. God's army defying Caesar's army. God's kingdom defying Caesar's empire. God's Son, the true Lord, the true King, subverting any lesser claim from any lesser king, or emperor, or dictator.

Earlier we sang,
***Sing, choirs of angels,
sing in exultation,
sing, all ye citizens of heaven above;
glory to God,
glory in the highest.***

³ *stratia*

⁴ *The New Living Translation*

⁵ *The Contemporary English Bible*

⁶ *The Kingdom New Testament* by N.T. Wright

Maybe we should have sung,
Shout, armies of angels,
Cry out in exultation,
Give praise, all ye soldiers of heaven above;
glory to God,
glory in the highest.

Glory to God. Not to Caesar.

The message of the angels knocks Caesar's world order on its head. Caesar is not the ultimate lord and savior. Instead, this newborn baby is. He is Savior. He is Lord.

And not only that, he is the true Prince of Peace. His peace is secured not by the point of a sword, but by the iron nails and the wood of the cross. His peace is not secured by military terror, but by the love of God.

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" On earth, peace among those who follow the true king, the true and only Lord, Jesus Christ.

In our culture, it has become a custom to thank members of our military when we see them in uniform. "Thank you for your service" we say. And this is a wonderful thing to do. In a real way, we sleep at night under the blanket of freedom that they secure for us.

But there is another army out there—God's angelic army. They proclaim the good news of the existence of an even greater peace, an even greater freedom.

And this is not escapism. This is a reality deeper than the reality of any earthly problem. This is a reality deeper than the reality of any earthly ruler, or terrorist, or dictator, or threat. This is a reality stronger than any force in our world. God's love is stronger than everything else. God's love is stronger than even death itself. And because of that love, we can live under the blanket of freedom. It is the blanket of true freedom, that nothing on earth can conquer, that no force on earth can take away.

The kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.

That's the battle cry of the angel army.

So do not be afraid. Behold we bring you good news of great joy. To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

Sleep under that blanket of freedom.

Sleep in heavenly peace.
Sleep in heavenly peace.