

Have Yourself a Meek and Lowly Christmas

Luke 2:1-14

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on 12/16/2012

Introduction

- ❖ This past Friday was opening day for *The Hobbit*. It follows in the success of the immensely popular *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, but of course this movie is actually a prequel to the familiar storyline of Frodo and Ring of Power.
 - Now the author of these books and creator of this mythical world called Middle Earth is J.R.R. Tolkien, a committed Christian. One who was not shy about letting his Christian beliefs give shape to his novels. Biblical themes are subtly but clearly woven into the story lines of both *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*.

- ❖ **Just think about how he uses a hobbit as the principle protagonist.** Most stories in this kind of fantasy genre have heroes who are mighty warriors – skilled in combat and courageous in battle. And Tolkien has characters who fit that description. In *Lord of the Rings*, you have Aragon son of Arathorn, heir to the throne of Gondor. In *The Hobbit*, you have the dwarf king, Thorin Oakenshield. These are the warrior kings you would expect to be the heroes. You expect them to save the day, and they do accomplish some heroic feats.
 - But it is a little hobbit who turns out to be the big hero. Tolkien describes a hobbit as between two and four feet tall. He says they look like children among men and elves. They tend to be stout in figure, have voracious appetites, and generally want nothing to do with adventure. Yet they are the ones who end up defeating the great evil of their day. They end up saving the world. Not the heroes you would have expected.

- ❖ **If we were given the choice, we would likely pick the powerful and attractive over the meek and lowly.** Guys, if you had to be a character in *Lord of the Rings*, you know you would pick Aragon over Frodo nine times out of ten. Would you rather have cool hair and an elven-forged sword or hairy feet and a glow-in-the-dark dagger? Ladies, if you were to marry a character, you would be lying if you said you would choose a hobbit over Legolas!

- ❖ **We know the hobbits are the heroes, but still our instinct is to celebrate power over meekness, to choose attractiveness over lowliness.** We do it all the time. Whether in the workplace, at school, among our circle of friends, we elevate the strong over the weak.
 - That's what we value, and these values shape what we pursue. We strive to be the best. To distinguish ourselves and stand out above others. To be recognized as intelligent and strong and influential. That's what we value. That's what we want.

- ❖ But this time of year we're reminded of another story, much like *The Hobbit*, that confronts our values and reverses our expectations by using the foolish to shame the wise, the weak to shame the strong, and the lowly to shame the proud (1 Cor. 1:27).
 - Not to take away from the brilliance of Tolkien's work, but this idea of unassuming hobbits from a lowly shire becoming great saviors is simply a retelling of the Christmas story – the story about an unassuming baby born in a lowly cattle shed who grows up to become the Savior of the World.

- ❖ If reading or watching *The Hobbit*, strikes a chord in you, know that it is because a story much like that was written into the very fabric of your soul. You were made to worship and glory in that story.
- ❖ Luke's account of that story is found in the second chapter of his Gospel in vv1-14. We hear this passage recited every Christmas season, but have we stopped to really consider the underlying message? **It is basically an affirmation and illustration of Jesus' teaching that the meek are blessed for they shall inherit the earth (Mt. 5:5). Why? Because the Meek One has come to earth that first Christmas morning to reign as its King.**
 - In these following verses, I want to draw your attention to four observations that join together to make this point. We're going to see: 1) The most powerful man on earth in the palm of God's hand, 2) The king of the universe in a modest manger, 3) The Emperor of Peace versus the Prince of Peace, and 4) The greatest news of all given to the lowliest of all.

See the Most Powerful in the Palm of God's Hand

- ❖ The first observation I want to highlight is found in vv1-5. In these verses I see an indictment against the way we tend to idolize those in positions of worldly power and authority. **Notice with me how the most powerful man on the earth in those days was in the palm of God's hand.**
- ❖ His name was **Caesar Augustus**. His birth name was Octavius. He was the nephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar, who was famously assassinated on the Ides of March. In the years that followed, Octavius rose to power but only after a bitter civil war with Mark Antony that nearly tore the empire apart. Octavius eventually prevailed and was crowned sole emperor and granted the honorific name, Augustus, which means 'majestic'.
 - **He was the most powerful man on earth.** Now we often speak of the American president being the most powerful man on earth because our country is currently the only superpower on the world scene. But even the President of the United States is checked by a constitution and two other branches of government.
 - But there were no checks and balances for Caesar. He was deified in the eyes of his citizens. He was revered as a god in human form. So his word was law. He spoke and it happened.
- ❖ Well we're told in **v1** that Caesar called for a census and all the known, inhabited world complied. *"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered."*
 - Now in **v4** we meet an ordinary couple named Joseph and Mary. They were actually introduced earlier in chapter 1, which is where we learned that Joseph happened to be of royal blood. He was *"of the house of David"* (Lk. 1:26).

- ❖ But at this point in Israel's history, that didn't mean much to many people. Boasting about being a descendant of King David would be like me claiming to be the heir to some ancient Chinese dynasty. That's neat and all, but no one is expecting the dynasty to come back.
 - In the same way, there was fading hope and expectation on the part of many that anyone would ever again sit on David's throne – especially when a king like Augustus was sitting on top of the world.

- ❖ So regardless of his bloodline, Joseph was just an ordinary guy betrothed to an ordinary girl. **There was no expectation on anyone's part that he and Mary would soon take part in events that would end up changing the entire world.** But in chapter 1 the angel Gabriel appears and announces to Mary that she will bear forth Israel's long-awaited Messiah.
 - You see, though hope was small, whatever hope remained hung on certain promises that God made long ago through Old Testament prophets about a coming Messiah – a chosen king who would one day reclaim David's throne.
 - One such prophet was **Micah**. He prophesied that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, the ancestral home of David (Micah 5:2).

- ❖ Now ancient readers of Luke's Gospel would have been familiar with this prophecy, so they would have noticed a dilemma. Luke is saying in **v4** that the supposed parents live in Nazareth, which is 90 miles north of Bethlehem and in a completely different province. And Mary is in her third trimester with little motivation to travel. What will it take to get this little couple to Bethlehem?

- ❖ **Well it came to pass that Caesar issued a decree.** The significance of **v1** suddenly becomes clear. Apparently God raised up Caesar Augustus and made him the most powerful man on earth, so that ultimately one day he would call for a census – the final piece in the puzzle that gets Joseph and a very pregnant Mary all the way to Bethlehem.
 - Now I'm sure Augustus would be offended to hear that – to suggest that all his power and authority existed to accomplish God's purposes, that in the end he was just following God's script, that he was just a pawn in God's hand.
 - He would argue that he had his own purposes – most likely to register citizens so he could then assess a tax. But his *decree* – though intended by Caesar for selfish gain – was intended by God for good – to fulfill his *decree* that the Messiah be born in the town of David.

- ❖ Just think of what this means. **God moved heaven and earth just to move that little couple 90 miles south. He raised up a king and an entire empire just to work out a small yet important detail in his big redemptive plans.**
 - If that's who God is and that's how he works, then it would be foolish to idolize those in positions of worldly power and authority. Honor them? Yes. Submit to them as to the Lord? Of course. But don't idolize them. Don't chase after their power and influence.

- ❖ Because in the end, they're not the real power. They're not the real authority. God is. **If you only look this high and idolize these people or their positions, then you fail to see who reigns in the highest.** You end up elevating the very things that God is intends to bring low through the Christmas story.

See the King of the Universe in a Modest Manger

- ❖ **The second thing I want you to see in this Christmas story is the King of the Universe in a modest manger.** This is quite a surprising turn of events. If the Messiah was to be this great king who restores Israel to her former glory, who establishes peace on earth, then you would expect his arrival to be celebrated with some pomp and pageantry.
- ❖ Earlier this year the Queen of England celebrated her Diamond Jubilee, which marks her 60th year on the throne. This time around she only toured the United Kingdom, but ten years ago, to celebrate her Golden Jubilee, she actually traveled the world visiting all the commonwealth nations.
 - It was a big deal for each hosting nation. They pulled out all the stops and spared no expense. When Queen Elizabeth visited Canada, the Canadian government shelled out \$6.7 million dollars for a twelve-day visit.
 - It's not like she was staying at the local Best Western. Factor in costs for the best hotels, banquet dinners and royal galas, butlers, chauffeurs, and hundreds of attendants – it's no surprise a royal visit is so extravagant and expensive.
- ❖ **So when the King of Kings and Lord of Lords comes, you would expect some royal treatment.** You would expect a red carpet reception. But instead the Messiah's visit to our world took place with no fanfare. **Vv6-7** describe the humble reception.
 - *"⁶And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."*
- ❖ Now the 'inn' Luke refers to was just a public shelter where passing travelers would gather for the night. It wasn't a formal inn. It wasn't like a hotel with desk clerks and maids. It was likely a separate room attached to a private home used for passing travelers (cf. Lk 22:11).
 - **But since none of these rooms were available, Joseph and Mary took shelter in an animal shelter.** Now it could have been an actual stable or a just section of a home reserved for animals. It could have even been a cave. Tradition actually favors a cave. In fact, the Church of the Nativity in modern-day Bethlehem was built over a cave site in the 4th century. Regardless, we know it was a place where they kept livestock because the '*manger*' was literally a feed trough used for animals.
- ❖ The whole point is that Israel's King – who turns out to be the King of the Universe veiled in flesh – ends up being born in a very dingy place, a smelly place, an inappropriate place. **He was born into poverty and obscurity.** Nobody was there to welcome him. No royal attendants were there to serve him. No one even knew he arrived.

- This doesn't make sense. **If God can move the hand of Caesar to issue a royal decree to serve his purposes of getting our little couple to Bethlehem, then surely he could have made sure there was enough room in the inn!** Surely he could have arranged for more fitting and dignified conditions!
 - Yet it was God's plan for the Messiah to be born in such poor conditions and in such a lowly, obscure manner. *Why?* Because it's a picture of the Gospel.

- ❖ The Lord Jesus, in his pre-incarnate state, was rich in glory. **Yet for our sake he became poor, so that through his poverty we might become rich in God** (2 Cor. 8:9). For our sake he became weak, so that he could lift weak sinners, like you and me, up to God. He became obscure, so that he could make obscure sinners, like you and me, known to his Father.
 - **The One who spoke the world into existence, who flung the stars into space – emptied himself of glory and became a man.** Not as a wealthy aristocrat, an intellectual elite, a military general, or a powerful emperor but as a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering. As one despised and rejected by man (Is. 53:3-5).
 - The King of the Universe came not to be served by royal attendants *but* to serve them and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mt. 20:28).

- ❖ Think about what this means. **If God was willing to come into our world as a vulnerable, needful, meek, little baby, then we have no need to fear or despise our own vulnerability, our own needfulness, our own meekness and smallness.** Christ emptied himself that he might fill us with hope.
 - Christian, do you realize who you're worshipping? Who you're following? **If you despise meekness, do you realize you're despising the very character of Christ?** But if you embrace meekness, know that you're embracing him.
 - Christ is no ordinary king. Kings throughout history have embraced nicknames like Alexander the Great, William the Conqueror, Richard the Lionheart, etc. But our King is known by another name. Jesus the Meek and Lowly. That's who you're worshipping.

See the Emperor of Peace versus the Prince of Peace

- ❖ Look with me now at vv8-14 and let's consider another nickname for Jesus. **Here we'll see a contrast being made between him and Caesar Augustus.** Augustus was known as the **Emperor of Peace**, but Jesus was called the **Prince of Peace**. Both are attributed with peace, but oh how different is the peace they bring!

- ❖ After that bitter civil war was behind him, Augustus ushered in a long era of peace, which commonly known as the **Pax Romana** (Peace of Rome) or the Pax Augusta (Peace of Augustus). It was a period of relative peace where no major wars or conflicts were fought.
 - So in the days of Jesus' birth, the hope of the Roman Empire was in Augustus. He had raised the expectations of what a leader could accomplish and what a peaceful society could achieve. Many revered him as a god. **Ancient records tell us that he was often called the 'savior of the world'.** The one who brought us peace on earth!

- ❖ **In fact, the Greek word for *good news* or *gospel* was commonly used in those days in reference to Augustus.** Significant events in Roman history – like his accession to the throne or his birthday – would be hailed throughout the empire as ‘good news’, as gospel!
- ❖ So imagine the surprise of these shepherds. While tending their flocks at night, an angel appears to them. And these Greek-speaking Jewish shepherds, living in the Roman Empire, hear this angel declare ‘good news’.
 - Look in **v10**, “*And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.””* **So the shepherds expect to hear news about Caesar. Is it his birthday already? No, but it was about the birth of another King.** *“¹¹For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹²And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”*
- ❖ The message was clear: **The Savior of the World was not garbed in royal robes sitting on a Roman throne. No, he was wrapped in swaddling cloths lying in a Bethlehem manger.** Now he may look like nothing, but this baby is “*Christ the Lord*”. “*His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*” (Is. 9:6) The Prince of Peace. Now you mustn't confuse the peace this child brings with the Emperor's peace.
- ❖ **The Emperor of Peace brought the fighting to an end.** No more war or bloodshed. No more widows and fatherless children. That's reason enough to celebrate. How we long for such peace in our day!
 - Our nation was visited once more by great evil and senseless violence as another mass killing spree took place last Friday. This time claiming the lives of 20 children and six adults. Our hearts grieve for these families. With them, we cry for peace, for the end of such violence, for a moral awakening and reformation in our society.
 - But even if laws are passed and cultural attitudes are changed and crime rates decline and mass shootings become a thing of the past – true peace, biblical peace, would still be lacking.
- ❖ **We would still need the peace that only the Prince of Peace can bring.** The Bible calls it *shalom*, which is not just the absence of war or strife or senseless violence. It's a state of wholeness, of completeness. ***Shalom* not only removes bitter sorrow from the face of the earth, *shalom* fills it with exceeding joy.** It not only eradicates evil doers who commit senseless crimes, it restores victims to wholeness and establishes perfect justice.
 - This is a peace no ruler or government can bring on earth. This is a peace only Jesus can bring. This is the peace heralded by the great company of the heavenly host in **v14**, who cry out, “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!*”

- ❖ *Now how did the Prince of Peace establish this shalom on earth? **Not by wielding the sword. But by falling on it.*** Not by crushing his enemies. But by dying for them. God's shalom comes not through strength and brute force. It comes by meekness and sacrifice.
 - All of us want peace on earth. This longing only grows stronger in the wake of a national tragedy. *So where is your hope? Where is your confidence?* If you're placing it in a person, a government, stricter laws, greater enforcement – prepare for disappointment. No earthly king, no president, no man or woman in a uniform or a suit has the power or authority to bring the kind of peace we all truly long for.
 - This is a reversal of human expectations. You would expect the one who can bring this *shalom* to be living in a palace – not lying in a manger.

See the Greatness News Given to the Lowliest

- ❖ But this is our God. This is our meek and lowly Savior, who first proclaimed his glorious message of peace to a meek and lowly people. This is our fourth and last observation. **I want you to see how the greatness news of all was given to the lowliest of all.**
- ❖ We're so familiar with the Christmas story that we consider it normal and natural for angels to appear and announce good news to certain shepherds out in the field. That's how the story goes! But what we modern readers fail to realize is that shepherds were the most unlikely people to go to first with a grand announcement.
 - If you were working for a public relations firm and your job was to design a campaign to announce the arrival of the Savior of the World, you would probably take your message to people of influence and power, to the intellectual and cultural elite.
- ❖ Back then you would have gone to the chief priests and scribes. You'd go to the **Sadducees**, the religious authorities. Or you'd go to the **Pharisees** who had the hearts of the people. Or better yet you'd go to **Rome**, the very seat of political power.
 - But if your campaign consisted of picking a random field out in the middle of nowhere Bethlehem to announce the greatest news of greatest joy to a bunch of lowly, gruff shepherds, you would probably be fired.
- ❖ Now it's not like shepherds were immoral people. **It's just that a shepherd is about as low as you can go down the social ladder.** No one aspired to be a shepherd. If you were a shepherd, it's probably because you were an uneducated, unskilled, common peasant. Shepherds were the lowest of the low.
 - Which makes it only fitting for the birth announcement of the Messiah to be given to lowly shepherds. Because when this baby boy grew up, these were exactly the kind of people he surrounded himself with.
- ❖ Our instinct is to draw near to the powerful and attractive, but Jesus does the opposite. **He attracted to himself the meek and lowly, the afflicted and broken hearted.**

- Brothers and sisters, just consider when Christ called you to himself, "²⁶*not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.* ²⁷*But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;* ²⁸*God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are,* ²⁹ *so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.*" (1 Cor. 1:26-29)

❖ **Like the shepherds in Jesus' day, God still chooses the foolish, the weak, and the lowly, and he entrusts *us* with the greatness news of all and calls *us* to spread that gospel through all the earth abroad, starting with friends and family this Christmas season.**

- And the whole point is it that if you're intimidated by that calling, if the prospect of sharing the message of Christ just downright frightens you, if it's because you feel too meek, or you think you're not as smart as them, or you're afraid they might despise you – today's passage suggests to me that you're just the person God wants.
 - You sound like just the sort of person God would choose to use to bring himself glory in the highest.