

1st Reading: Isa 2: 2-7

² In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. ³ Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. ⁴ He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

Judgement Pronounced on Arrogance

⁵ O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!
⁶ For you have forsaken the ways of your people, O house of Jacob. Indeed they are full of diviners from the east and of soothsayers like the Philistines, and they clasp hands with foreigners. ⁷ Their land is filled with silver and gold, and there is no end to their treasures; their land is filled with horses, and there is no end to their chariots.

2nd Reading: Luke 2: 1-7 (The Birth of Jesus)

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

>>> # 133

“O Little Town of Bethlehem”

3rd Reading: Luke 2:8-14 (The Shepherds and the Angels)

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’

>>> #125

“Angels We Have Heard on High”

4th Reading: Luke 2:15-20

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

>>> # 132	"Joy to the World"
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# 880	A Litany of Darkness and Light
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CHRISTMAS EVE 2011 – sermon by Rev. Peter Dennebaum

God's peace with you!

Jesus' birth story starts in the gospel of Luke with a blare of trumpets: *"In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria."* (Luke 1:1 & 2)

These two sentences are mistaken in several aspects. Yes, it is correct that Augustus (64 BC – 14 AC) introduced a tax system, which required to get registered. But we know from the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (38-100 AC) that the governor Quirinius organized this registration not until the year 6 AC, when Judea became part of the province Syria. Jesus was then probably already 12 years old.

Luke is not interested in a correct historical report; he wants to make another point: That with the birth of Jesus a totally new world order has started. This is for Luke the reason to change also the birth location from Nazareth to Bethlehem, 70 miles linear distance away. Like for Matthew it is important for Luke to see Jesus verified through the prophet Micah (5;1), who prophesied 300 year ago the coming of the Messiah in Bethlehem.

This theological connection is for Luke so important that he accepts therefore another contradiction: Indecorous [indé-keres] that Mary &

Joseph would travel and live together without being married, only as fiancés; even in our latitudes it would have been a huge problem until the 1960s. It is also totally unimaginable that all men would have been sent for the registration into their birth towns – the whole empire would have been mixed up for years.

From all these inconsistencies we can conclude that Luke had something else in mind than historical accuracy. Matthew draws a contrast between king Herod the Great and the true king Jesus (Matt 2: 1-23). Luke goes even further: With the coming of Jesus in the city of David, Bethlehem, EVERYTHING changes – not only for Israel, but for the whole world; Jesus changes the rules of power from now on for ever! From now on we have to choose what we REALLY believe in: the Messiah from Israel OR the Roman Emperor, the son of God, prophesized by Hebrew prophets OR the apotheosized office holder on the throne of Cesar, the power of mercy OR the power of the weapons.

We can get an idea how tart Luke must have thought in these alternative categories, when we listen to Nicolaus of Damascus, chancellor and scribe of King Herod. He wrote in 23 BC about the Roman Emperor, that the name Augustus was given to him as a title of honor, that he got worshiped in temples, that he concentrated the largest conglomeration of nations in the history of human mankind in the largest geographical dimensions and that he won the hearts of the people like nobody else before him.

Those words of glory are said in all times about the current world power: 2000 years ago it was the Pax Romana. Today, in the 21st century some Think Tanks in DC would probably speak about a Pax Americana for our days. But world powers have their own legalities; they all are interested in economical and military spheres of influences, the access to resources. This is also the reason for the tax registration Luke reports about.

And this is also the context into which Luke introduces Jesus so radically different as alternative concept – contrary to all endeavors of human self-aggrandizement [self-aegraen-deis-ment] and human self-idolization [eidala-seischen], to become immortal through power and wealth.

Jesus invites to a different kind of power. Negatively spoken Jesus positions himself against all violent power. Positively Spoken: Jesus believes in the power of love in the hearts of people. Which right have the powerful to build their greatness on the dead bodies of their victims? Who taught them to cut down whole forests to flank the highways of the Empire with crosses of executed people? Which cultural achievement shall it be, to build representative buildings and water pipes, when people lose their freedom and dignity? Against all unscrupulousness [anskrú-pulusness] to sacrifice people on the altar of the eagerness for power, Jesus asks us to accompany people into their own maturity. --In ALL times.--- Instead of using the labor of a person for the increase of the own wealth, we shall teach people to

explore and develop the richness of their own lives. Instead of making ourselves, our own traditions and convictions to the measurement for others, we shall campaign that people can find their own measurement, which they then can keep.

Such a message seems simple. But it means the overthrow of everything. Such a message is like a warm wind, which melts the glaciers [glie-schrs] and its water will be like tears. Such a message is like a mild tone in midst of all the shouting.

That a mother gives birth to the son of God while traveling or fleeing like in the gospel of Matthews is an old, mythological motive – but this time not from the antique Egypt, but ancient Greece.

In the symbol language of the myths and dreams the birth giving of a child is equivalent with giving birth to a new part of our soul in us – without having constituted it or even knowing, how it will develop. Whenever we experience the coming of something genuine new, we are frightened. But we know that we need to allow the repressed and unlived to come into life, so that happiness and maturing can happen.

The Christmassy [krist-messi] picture of the Madonna with her child is burned rightly in our memories: the birth of the child wants to be understood as the salvation from our own adulthood. The Birth Mythologies don't talk about the biographical beginning of a God, but the picture of a child-God: How much in us is overwhelmed since our days as child? How much got educated away, forbidden and

alienated for the purpose to make us real people and brave functioning adults? It might be that we have learned to assimilate us with the time, to become more and more streamlined, more and more purpose oriented - on costs of our emotional health, the price of repression of so many gifts, which still dose deep in us. It seems to be natural that we meet this unknown, undiscovered piece in us with skepticism and fear; but the rescue of these treasures in us might decide on one point in our lives about our health or sickness, about our life's success or failure, about the meaning or meaningless of everything, what we are and did. This child in us, this primordial [prei-mordi-EI] in ourselves we need to gain back ... TO BECOME WHOLE. The German author Eric Kaestner (1899-1977) said once: "Who stops to be as adult the child, he once was, stops to be a human being." End of quote. Who ever has become too early an adult in his life, will face later in life the challenge, to learn being a child; only this way we can arrive at ourselves and live honestly and authentically.

Our nativity scenes usually have ox and donkey. Both became part of the scene because of a misunderstanding of Isaiah 1, verse 3: "³ The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib;..." Nevertheless are ox and donkey psychologically and ecologically correct: Interesting wise they help us to sense something about the calm joy and peace of a purpose-free being – aside our sedulousness [se-duelesness], forage or the building of a house; ox and donkey introduce us this way into the child-like happiness of a simple identity

with ourselves.

Also the shepherds have a deeper meaning. In ancient Greece we find the story that Aigle [Aigel], the mistress of the God Apollo, abandons her newborn on a mountain. The newborn with the name Asclepio got found by the shepherd Aresthanas [Aeris-tenas] – lying between a goat, breastfeeding the infant, and a dog, watching over the child. In the Greek mythology the goat symbolizes fruitfulness, the dog on the other hand the underworld. Lying in between those two animals the baby Asclepio represented the synthesis of light and dark, day and night, life and death, consciousness and sub-consciousness. When he later served in the temple in Epidaurus, his priests would explain the dreams to the people, they dreamed while sleeping in the temple. Those priests can be understood as precursors [pre-coersers] of our modern Psychoanalysts. They obviously knew already about the miraculous [mira-cueles] ability of us humans, to recognize our own identity in our dreams. These “docter-priests”, as we can call them, trusted that people would find protected shelter in Gods sanctuary, which would allow them to dream safely, to grow, change and heal towards their real identity.

Luke, who is according to the apostle Paul himself doctor, (in his Epistle to the Colossians [kollósch(i)ens] 4:14), picks up this therapeutic message of the Asclepio-myth in his birth story about Jesus – and justifiable so! Because one of the central efforts of this “child-God” of Bethlehem will be to calm down the fear of people with

his own trust into God as the father. Essentially Jesus self-understanding was the one as a healer (Luke 9:2). In him lived a power, which was able to touch our soul in a way that it got filled with healing dreams.

Not by accident it is a shepherd, who finds the child in the Asclepio-story and not by accident shepherds find baby Jesus. Even Jesus addressed his message to the poor and outcast - economically wise the craftsmen family of Jesus was not poor itself neither [niether] the shepherds. At the most shepherds were suspected by settlers to be thieves as they were moved so often. (BTW: The same prejudices face still in our days gypsies.) But shepherds play in the myths of Asclepio or Jesus a special role: They represent the passage between nature and culture; they mark the transfer from the nomadic hunter and gatherer age to the life style of the farmers. Especially as personifications of transits are shepherds the perfect receivers for a God, whose message wants to overcome polarities and mature our personalities. Only the shepherds are therefore able to hear the proclamation of the angels.

A last thought. How can we hear the voices of angels, how do we see their figures in the night, if not in the visions of a longing heart? How much fulfillment must live in the soul of a human, until he wants to bless the whole world and experience the world as blessing?

The angels bestow the condition to accept the proclamation. The first thing they do is to take away the fear all experience of the divine goes

along with. In his Christmas sermon Gregory of Nyssa (330-395 AC) declared: "The whole creation is Gods' temple, filled with the praise of angels, in which we people need to find our own tone, harmony and symphony." What a wonderful picture. But key is: We can't redeem ourselves; all redemption is grace! This is the message, the angels bring: Grace and peace! Peace only can happen, where people experience understanding, and not judgment. Peace on earth is only possible where people can trust in Gods' kindness.

While the angels return to their heavenly homes, the shepherds, simple people, become in their place messengers of grace. This acceptance and this crossing over might be the real miracle of Jesus birth story. The shepherds dare to transit to the reality, from the message of the angels to the insight into their own lives. It is this moment, we all are afraid about – when we cross from dreaming into action. How often do we then hear by the so called "realists" that our dreams would break at the hardness of the reality and that our dreams would be nothing else than imaginations of our heart?

In this Holy Night 2011 God renews his promise. She, the creator of all, her majesty, she/he, mother/father of all wants us to keep going to the stall and the manger, to prove that we can say "no" to all the cynics, so called "realists", who have lost already all their own visions, god, peace and joy. Therefore it is important that the shepherds even explain the Madonna who she has given birth to.

Take care about the child in you! It is God, who speaks in it. A world

of peace is possible; it starts with you. It is God, who saves. Allow it to happen. Allow the child in you to talk and interact with God, so that you can live.

Merry Christmas!

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UCC Statement of Faith (in unison)