

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

Isaiah 9: 2 – 7
Titus 2: 11 – 14

Psalm 96
Luke 2: 1 – 20

Pax Romana! Pax Romana! The peace of Rome! Greetings!

News travels fast, does it not? You must have heard it already yourselves, I am certain! What do you think about it?? I heard about it because, as a Census Taker, I must be aware of all the happenings with the people of this region – births, deaths, marriages – everything! I serve at the pleasure of Emperor Augustus, and when he issues a decree, such as for this census, well then those of us in his service have work to do! How can the Emperor know if his people are cheating him out of taxes if I don't do my job well and let him know how many people there are and where they are?

I know these people because they are *my* people, though I don't think they would say the same about me. I am a Roman citizen, but I am also a Jew. I am despised only slightly less than the tax collectors who also work for Rome. Only slightly less because I'm not actually the one taking the money from them. I don't really want to be in this position, hated by my own people, but I didn't have much choice. I got hurt and couldn't work, so I got behind on my own taxes. I had the choice of being thrown into prison or working for the Romans. At least this way, I can provide for my family. So yes, I was working in this very office when the rumors about the happenings at the cave near the Inn began last night.

It all started, I think, with that magnificent star that everyone's been talking about for the last several weeks. A star, directly above us here in Bethlehem. As it sparkles in the clear, cold night air, it seems to point all the way down to us. Its brilliance is like nothing I've ever seen before. I'm not an astronomer, but it has seemed like a very auspicious sign of something about to happen, perhaps of Yahweh acting in some way for us, the people of God.

The city has been so full of travelers. Normally, it's a rather sleepy little city. But despite its size, Bethlehem has been an important place for Yahweh to act through people, such as Boaz who married Ruth. They had a son named Obed, who had a son named Jesse, who was the father of our glorious King David. But as I mentioned, the Emperor decreed a census, which means that heads of households are to come to register in the cities from which their families, their tribes, came. Which is how I ran into Joseph.

Joseph came in here today to register in the census. Joseph, through his father Heli, is descended directly from David and Jesse and Boaz in the tribe of Judah. He grew up here, learning his craft from his father, who was also a carpenter. He's a little younger than I am, but we've known each other a long time. We are, of course, distant cousins. The rumors about what was going on at the Inn had said that a baby had been born out in the cave behind the Inn which is used as a stable. I didn't realize at the time that it was Joseph's child.

There are too many family members coming back for the census for everyone to stay with family, so the Inn has been full to overflowing. It's terrible that this young couple had to stay outside in the cold last night when their baby came, but perhaps at least the warmth of the animals helped to shelter them. If there couldn't be a bed, at least there was a large pile of fresh, clean hay.

So Joseph came into the census office today to register. I hadn't seen Joseph for a few years, so when I saw him, I left my table and rushed over to congratulate him. But he seemed, well...reflective, not at all the excited new father I would have expected. Joyful, to be sure, but there was something more restrained about him, almost as if he were walking in a daze of wonderment.

Joseph greeted me in return, surprised to see me in this office, no doubt. Unlike others, he was very respectful. When he lived in Bethlehem, he, along with his father before him, had had a reputation for being hardworking and fair, as well as gifted builders and carpenters. I congratulated him on his new child and on continuing the family line. I asked all the usual questions – boy or girl? Mother okay? He didn't seem surprised that I knew about the birth. Small town, news travels, I suppose.

"So how does it feel now that you're a father?" I asked. He gave me a most curious look.

"Well, I'm sort of a father, yes, I guess you can call me that," he replied slowly.

"What do you mean 'sort of'?" I asked. "Either you are or you aren't," I said, "The baby's okay isn't he?"

"Oh, yes, he's a delight! The most beautiful, deep eyes that seem to take in everything."

Puzzled still, I tried again, "Then why 'sort of'? You're married to Mary, you just had a baby and you're responsible for his well-being, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes, absolutely," said Joseph, suddenly looking very serious and somewhat anxious. "Mary had a baby, and I'm responsible for them both."

Feeling like there was something not being said, I asked yet again, "So why did you say 'sort of'? You're not planning to give us wrong information for the census, are you?" He knew I was teasing him.

"No, no, of course not," he said with a small laugh. "It's just..." He paused again.

"What?! It's just what?"

"Well, I'm not sure that you're going to believe me, but it's the God's honest truth, truly" he said, lowering his voice so the others in the room couldn't hear. "I don't know any other way to say this than point blank. Mary and I are married, but we haven't consummated the marriage yet. We've never...you know, known each other. And there hasn't been anyone else, of that I'm sure. Of course, when I found out that she was pregnant, that was the first thing I thought. I've known her most of my life and I care deeply for her. I love her, and I didn't want to do anything to disgrace her or her family, so I was trying to figure out a way to send her away quietly. A way to discreetly divorce her.

"Then one night, a few days after she had told me about the baby, I had a dream. In that dream, there was an angel of the Lord. I always thought those things happened to someone else, but here was the angel, larger than life." Joseph paused again, giving me a quick look, as if taking stock of whether I was believing him or not.

"An angel," I was thinking to myself. "Really? Really??" I wasn't so sure I was believing Joseph, but he was so serious, so sincere. What do angels really look like, I wondered, while he paused. How would I know if it WAS an angel who appeared? And how would I know if the angel was from the Lord or not? And why do they always seem to say, 'don't be afraid?' I didn't know any of those answers, but I knew I wanted to hear more.

Joseph looked carefully around the room to be sure no one else was listening, but they were all too busy with the registration. Then he continued. "The angel told me not to be afraid, and not to hesitate about marrying Mary. The angel said that it would not bring dishonor on me or my family and that, in fact, this child will be the long-awaited salvation of our people! Imagine that! This child - the Messiah! And because this child will grow to become the Savior, we are to call him Joshua, Jeshua,

Jesus - God saves. It's a good thing all this was in a dream because I probably would have fainted dead away if I had been awake!" Joseph smiled, apparently recalling the vision of his dream.

"The angel assured me that this child is God's will and somehow, I know that more deeply than I've ever known anything!" Joseph paused, his face softening, "When I let Mary know about my dream, she was ecstatic and shared again with me her encounter with the angel. She's been so happy and so radiant these last months! There has never been any sense of shame or impropriety about her, instead, there has simply been joy at being chosen as such a special servant of Yahweh. Mary has known all along in her heart that this is of God, and so she's been singing every day, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior.' I don't think that I have ever seen a woman so happy. It was difficult talking to our families and assuring them that this has all been God's doing, but somehow they accepted it. Not long after that, she went to stay with her cousin, Elizabeth for a few months. And since she returned, the time has flown by!"

"So you had to travel for this census with her rather pregnant?" I asked.

"Yes, we weren't expecting that, but the decree was issued and Mary insisted on coming with me down here all the way from Nazareth. We just got here last evening. I don't remember ever seeing Bethlehem this crowded! None of my family had room and neither did the inn by the time we got there. We were hoping we still had a little time, but somehow babies come whether you are ready for them or not. I suppose riding on the donkey all that way didn't help matters. At least the innkeeper had that protected cave out back where we are sort of sheltered from the night air. And the animals helped, too. Fortunately, the innkeeper had a small lamp we could borrow, but what really helped was the light from that incredible star above us. That star brought light into our darkness, rather like this little one will one day do, I suppose."

"So...I should put you down as a family of three for the purposes of the registration?" I asked.

"Put down Joseph, and Mary, and Jesus, born of Mary. Into our family. Yes, that's the way to list it. I've always been mindful of the law, both of God and of Rome, and now more than ever I want to do that. Jesus, born of Mary, into our family. Yes."

Not much else happened while Joseph was in the office. He got his little family registered and then left. *He* left, but he left *me* feeling something, hoping something – something I'm not sure I understand or maybe ever will. I know firsthand what it's like to have a baby come in and change everything you've been used to. A baby often brings a man and woman closer together in this new creation that they share. But something different, something more, has happened with Joseph, and perhaps Mary as well. Something has touched Joseph's heart, something, well, dare I say something of Yahweh? And somehow, seeing that in him has changed me. Sure, I'm a Jew and I was raised to worship God, but it's been difficult to do that ever since I took this job. Working for the Emperor, I'm supposed to worship all those little pagan gods that the Romans have, and worship the Emperor himself, but my – don't tell anyone – my heart's not in that either. I haven't had much to do with God lately, I suppose.

I've often wondered if people have just invented gods to satisfy their own needs and desires, but something happened today. In me. It's like there was something drawing me into Joseph's awe and wonder, into his trust in Yahweh's doings. And what about that amazing star? Why is it here, now? In all the rumors last night, I heard about a bunch of shepherds who filled the lanes with their sheep last night, trying to get a look at this tiny new boy. And you know how they heard about it? Yes, more angels. Apparently out where the sheep were grazing, the night sky turned as bright as day with more angels and heavenly beings than they could count, singing to them. How can all these people experiencing angels not mean something? Or *are* there really angels? Has Yahweh actually been

involved in any of this, or is it all just people's imaginations and a bunch – a whole bunch – of coincidences? Has Yahweh acted this day in a way as never before to save the people of God? Is there something truer and greater than I've ever imagined going on here? Is it all just for the sake of this baby and Joseph and Mary, or might it be for me, too? And you, too? I wonder...

I have so many questions. So many doubts. But so many hopes, too. I thought I might want to go find Joseph and Mary, and see this little baby for myself. I don't know if that would answer all the questions I have or not. Perhaps it would raise even more questions. And that is really why I'm here tonight, stepping down through all these years. Because of you. You who know so much more about who this child will become and what he will do. You sing praises to him and about him. You read about him. You pray to him. You build these magnificent buildings and dedicate them to him. You light candles to bring light into the darkness of this world. Just like the star. Just like this little baby will do. You do these things because the same things stirring in and tugging at me are pulling at you as well. You, too, wonder – angels, *really*? You wonder about the star. And how this baby came to be. And if Yahweh might really be in this baby and in this world and in this moment, right now. Is it true? Is it real? Does Jesus really live into his name and deliver the people of Yahweh, you and me and everyone else, forever? Is he somehow God himself?

You know, I never got a chance to go find Joseph, Mary and the baby before they left. I don't know if that would have helped me resolve all these things or not. I certainly don't pretend to have all the answers to these questions. I ponder them over and over again in my heart. But that strange 'something' keeps tugging at me. Calling me. Loving me even in my doubt and confusion. The birth of that child changed Joseph. And I want that change in me and in my life. I want Yahweh, God, to fill me with that trust, that joy, that peace, that hope. I want this tiny little baby boy born in Bethlehem to come into the messiness of my life and bring healing and wholeness and forgiveness. I wonder if maybe you, do, too. Pax Romana, the peace of Rome? No, the peace of our Lord be with you always, and most especially on this holy night.

(This sermon was inspired by one that my cousin, the Rev. Dale S. Bringman, preached when I was growing up.)

+