
At Christmas, God Saves the World One Person at a Time

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
Christmas Eve

On this night, two thousand years ago, the time in which Jesus was born, what else was happening in the world? If modern twenty-four hour television news programs had existed back in those days, what would they have been reporting?

Well, first of all, the Roman Empire might well have owned the news media. Citizens and slaves alike would have heard that night about new territories being claimed in Northern Africa. The empire was spreading all the way to the British Isles.

But, contrary to what many of those citizens thought, the world was actually bigger than the Roman Empire. In China, the first century was led by the Han Dynasty, and astronomers had already catalogued a thousand stars. Some were already following the writings of Lao-Tse, who taught the "Tao," the "Way."

In India, kingdoms were rising and falling along the Ganges. The teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, were spreading into Southeast Asia. In many areas of Africa, the Iron Age was still arriving. In the Americas, the Mayan civilization was about to flourish. All over the world, tribes and clans fought and made peace, planted and harvested, lived and learned.

And, in those days, a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. "All the world," he said! Imagine that! Emperor Augustus no idea how big the world really was, and he did not get very far. It is the nature of empire to over-reach, to think too highly of itself.

But something did happen back in those days. Into this world of families and tribes, and into this world of empire, dynasty, and kingdom, some very common people heard angels, and some wandering strangers saw a star.

Imagine that you had a Google map software program back in those days, a camera feature on your computer, and you could see the entire earth on your screen. You press a few keys; the program begins to zoom in miraculously and quickly, to a spot not far from Bethlehem. The little town is full of hopes and fears, and there are certain poor shepherds out in the fields at night. Your world camera zooms right into their faces, and their faces are full of amazement.

Glory, glory, seems to be all around! What is this glory that their faces see? Would the Google map camera have seen the angels? Would the World News have reported that glory?

I doubt it. The odds are that no empire reported that glory. No political empire and no media empire, and no entertainment empire and no religious empire, reported that glory. It is not the nature of empires to see angels. The world kept turning.

A few days later, a group of magi saw something. They talked of a star, but the local authorities had not noticed it. King Herod and his chief priests and scribes had not noticed it. Of course, the magi were always seeing signs in the stars that no one else saw.

It is not everybody who hears angels and sees stars. Two thousand years ago, not many people at all heard the angels or saw the star.

The angels were saying "Glory!" and "Do not fear!" but the world is envious of a glory not of its own making.

And the words, "Do not fear" are not the words of empires and kingdoms and dynasties. Empire and kingdoms thrive upon fear. They depend upon it. Back in those days, the Roman Empire needed fear to survive. Angels, on the other hand, are always saying, "Do not fear!"

The stars of that time were the same ones we generally see reported today: pumped-up gladiators, greedy kings, self absorbed attention grabbers who do violence to common sense. The world of empire and kingdom would have us focus on the stars of acquisition and violence.

And we are tempted, tempted oh so mightily, to think that maybe, just maybe, the stars being broadcast today over our air waves and on to our newspaper pages and onto our computer screens, maybe these stars can bring us hope. Maybe they can bring us peace. Maybe they can bring us salvation, Christmas itself.

But God rarely works through the massive superpowers of life. God rarely works through the voices we hear the loudest, or the lights that shine the brightest and suck up all the energy around them.

Our God works through small voices and simple lights sounds and stars that much of the world misses altogether. For the star of God always shines on something other than itself. The star of wonder, star of night, always shines beyond itself; it leads to perfect light.

The true stars of the world, yesterday or today, are the stars that shine on Jesus. True stars shine on giving, not getting.

Christmas does not come from the almighty powers upon which we always seem to project our hopes. It is impossible for the powers of empire, it is impossible for imperialism, to shine new life or to sing the song of Gloria. It will not be empire that delivers the hope of Christmas.

It will not be Caesar Augustus, demanding registration and taxes. It will not be Herod the Great, the narcissistic king insisting on personal attention. It will not be the Roman Empire. And Christmas will not come from China, or Russia, or Africa, or the United States of America - despite all the attention Americans will give to elections this year, and whoever we might elect.

And Christmas will not come from the Archbishop of Canterbury either, or from any Primate or Patriarch, or from any Rabbi or Imam or Grand Mufti, or the Buddha, or the Tao, or the voice of the Pope.

Christmas will come from below. Christmas will come from ordinary shepherds keeping watch over their flocks, strange wise men searching the heavens, young women pondering words in their hearts, couples struggling to bring new life into the world, maybe the person right next to you.

Christmas does not come from empire. Christmas comes from below. Christmas comes from humanity, ordinary flesh infused with the glory of God.

This is why so many of us delight in the children's Christmas pageants each year. We already know the entire story. We have seen, so many times before, the bathrobes and cardboard crowns, the little gift boxes and the hundreds of animals.

But we go back to the pageants again and again. Why? Because the children are a new generation of angels and stars. God is always working in the new generation, in the new birth, in the lowly and unformed and undeveloped.

It is in the lowly that we truly see the light of God. God does not save the world all at once. God saves the world one person at a time. God saves the world through you and me, through the person sitting next to you right now. God saves the world

one person at a time.

Yes, in lowly Judea, in Palestine, a child was born two thousand years ago. The world itself did not notice much. But that child grew. At twelve years old, he was leaving his parents. At thirty years old or so, he began to preach and teach elsewhere. He grew larger still. He grew into a community of confused and lowly strangers.

That child grew into the Roman Empire. He grew into North Africa. He grew into the British Isles. He grew into India and the Far East. He grew into North America and South America. He has grown into the whole world. He has grown like the Google map camera zooming back out, covering now the whole earth.

And now, tonight, angels are singing all around the world. Listen to those angels: "Do not fear," they sing. "There is good news here of a great joy for all people." Tonight, a star is shining all around the world, shining on the person next to you right now. Wherever you are, look around you; look at what the star is shining on.

It shines on Jesus, the lowly child born in a manger. The star of wonder shines on Jesus, God made flesh for the salvation of the whole world.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip