

Title: Savior, Christ the Lord

Text: Luke 2:1-18

Luke: A Gospel for the whole wide world

Living in Different Worlds:

My sister Ruth and her husband moved to Paris many years ago. They raised their family there, but wanted their children to retain their English and their sense of American culture. As a result, they sent their son Piers to stay with his cousin, Roland Jr. for several summers. Piers went to university, and then worked in China as an engineer. While there he married a lovely young Chinese woman named Sera. After the birth of their second child they moved to Paris. One of the greatest highlights of our anniversary trip to Paris was the chance to see Piers and meet his family.

To be with Piers and Sera is to be in three different worlds – all at the same time! They physically live in France, so learning and speaking French makes up one of their worlds. But they don't want the children to lose touch with the fact that they are actually American citizens, so they speak English with the children, especially when grandma is around. Nor do they want the children to lose their Chinese heritage, so they speak Mandarin at home. American cartoons, Chinese food and French bread are all part of a normal day. It all comes with living in three different worlds.

Luke's Three Worlds:

When Luke set out to write his story of Jesus, he did so with the awareness that his audience lived in three different worlds:

- Their culture and language was Greek.
- Their government and laws were Roman.
- Their faith was shaped by faith in a Jewish Messiah.

Luke himself was a product of this world. He was a Greek who had been very sympathetic to Judaism before coming to faith in Jesus. He understood the power of Rome. He understood, therefore, that the story of Jesus – the Gospel – needed to be anchored in all three worlds.

Luke's Introduction:

The introduction to his Gospel shows just how much care he took in making sure that the Good News connected with the complex world of his audience.

Luke 1:1-4 NIV

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³ With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Luke's introduction tells us several things:

- First, it is written in excellent Greek, and Luke informs us that he has followed the requirements for writing a reliable history. He has researched eye-witness accounts and has studied various dependable sources. His book meets the standard for an historical account in his Greek culture.
- Second, his book is meant to claim “a place for Christianity on the stage of world history.” (I.H. Marshall, *Luke*, p. 40) More than simply relating eye-witness accounts, Luke has written an “orderly account” which connects the story of Jesus with the greater Roman world in which He lived.
- Third, Luke assures Theophilus that this will be a reliable source for knowing who Jesus really was and is. Luke was concerned that his readers “know with certainty of the things you have been taught.” They were called to be followers of Jesus, the Messiah of the Jews.

Like Luke and the people of his world, we also live in multiple worlds. We are followers of Jesus, but we are also citizens of modern nations and members of an ever more connected world culture. How easy to fall into the trap of isolating ourselves from a confusing and contradictory culture. Or, on the other hand, how tempting to simply go along with an increasingly pagan world. Luke can help us see how to avoid the pitfalls and live as Jesus' followers in our multi-faceted world.

Luke's Christmas Story

Anchored on the World Stage:

When Luke sets out to tell the Christmas Story, he does so by first of all anchoring it in the Roman world. Listen to how he begins:

Luke 2:1-3 NIV

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register.

The Christmas Story begins – from a strictly human point of view – in a palace in faraway Rome. The first person named in the story is Caesar Augustus, Rome’s first and most famous emperor. He is the one who brought an end to civil war and peace to the empire.

The emperor commands that his subjects present themselves to be registered for taxation. Readers familiar with the Jewish homeland would have known that this decree sparked rebellion and unrest that would only grow over subsequent decades. By the time of the writing of the Gospel of Luke, the crushing power of Rome had perhaps already come down hard on Jerusalem, burning its temple and leveling it to the ground.

Luke’s readers were no stranger to Rome. They knew its might and power. They lived under its laws. Caesar Augustus’ birthday was described on inscriptions as “gospel,” or “good news” for the entire world. If the Christmas Story was the story of the birth of the world’s true Lord, then it would have to take into account Caesar and his empire.

Birthed in Bethlehem:

Luke’s Christmas Story moves swiftly – at Caesar’s own command – from Roman world to the land of the Jews and the “little town of Bethlehem.”

Luke 2:4 NIV

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.

Roman world – Nazareth – Bethlehem – manger. We’ve traveled from the center of the Empire to a backwater village on its eastern border. We’ve gone from palace to barnyard, from emperor to homeless infant. Except for one little hint of things to come: Bethlehem is the “town of David.” Joseph is from David’s line. And from King David will come God’s long-promised King.

No sooner is the baby Jesus born, wrapped in cloths and placed in the manger, than an angel appears in the sky over Bethlehem. His message: David’s Son has just been born:

Luke 2:10-12 NIV

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

The world of Rome and the world of occupied Israel collide in the Town of David with the birth of Jesus. The angel identifies that King as none other than Messiah. In ancient Israel when a king was crowned, a priest poured oil on his head. This act set the person apart for his special role. The Hebrew word for this was *mashiach*, from which we get the word “Messiah.”

Savior and Lord:

Words are funny things. The same word can carry very different meanings from culture to culture. Nowhere is that more evident in the two titles that accompany the angel's announcement of the birth of the Messiah: Savior and Lord.

In the Psalms King David wrote:

Psalm 18:46 NIV

The LORD lives! Praise be to my Rock! Exalted be God my Savior!

Many years later, Isaiah speaks for God, saying:

Isaiah 43:11 NIV

*I, even I, am the LORD,
and apart from me there is no savior*

When the Jewish people translated the Hebrew Scriptures into the Greek language, they used the Greek word *kurios*, or "Lord" for the sacred name, Yahweh. English translations of the OT often represent God's Holy Name as "LORD," in keeping with this ancient tradition. Jewish people eagerly awaited the return of Yahweh, the LORD, as Savior. He alone could rescue them and restore them. He alone was both Creator and Redeemer.

Pagan Greeks of Luke's time would have known the words "Savior" and "Lord" in a different way altogether. The Greek word for Savior was "soter." They regularly used it as a title for their gods and heroes. Often it was added to the name of the king to emphasize how he had delivered his people from harm.

It is no surprise, then, that one of Caesar Augustus' titles was "Savior. He was the Roman emperor who had ended years of civil war and had established peace across the realm. More often, however, the emperor was referred to as "Lord." He was the supreme ruler of the land, increasingly thought of as a god in human form. His birthday was celebrated as "good news," or "gospel," across the land.

But now Caesar and his entire world have been upstaged by Heaven itself. Jesus, not Caesar, is Savior. Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord. Heaven and Earth have come together, and there's only room for one King.

Living Luke's Christmas Story

Living in your Rome/Bethlehem:

Luke's Christmas Story reminds us that we live in both Rome and Bethlehem. We live within a culture that is powerful and seductive. We live under laws that may or may not acknowledge the true God or His commands. We live in a world that demands our full allegiance. But Luke reminds us that God has a way of sneaking into the world and upsetting things. God didn't take the culture head on; instead, He birthed His King in Bethlehem, and put Him to bed in a manger. God does the same thing today. That is why Jesus compared the Kingdom of God to a tiny mustard seed or to yeast that a woman works into a lump of dough.

Messiah, Savior and Lord:

But never underestimate what God is doing! The baby turned out to be the great King, the Messiah. And that same King is here to redeem our world today. Only this time, *you* are the manger, and *your world* is the Bethlehem. The powers that be will issue their commands and seem to be in charge of everything. But don't be fooled by a show of influence or force. The real contest is for *you, your mind, your heart and soul*. That is why God sends His King to each one of us – asking if we will acknowledge Him as Savior and Lord.

You are the *kingdom in question*. You are what matters most to God. Elections can be bought and sold. Kingdoms can be lost and conquered. But only the human heart can fall in love with its Creator.

Living the Story:

So, go out and live the story. It is *your* story. You are more than a consumer or customer. You are more than a demographic in the next election. You are a person created by God alone to reflect His presence and glory into this world. That is why He sent His Son, Jesus into the world. Jesus came to assure that you could become what God meant for you to be. Jesus came to *save you from your sin*. Jesus came to *rule with God's goodness and justice*. Jesus came as *King of kings and Lord of lords*. But only you can make the decision to be His Bethlehem, His manger.