

This evening we have had the whole picture of God's salvation history laid out for us. How easy it would be to go to one of those readings and avoid the nativity account in Lk 2 since we hear it every year, and I've preached on it now probably a good 30 times. And yet, I'm struck by how our particular need at the moment affects the way we approach it. We hear the same reading we've heard for years, but we hear it in a different way. Year after year, but always in a new way.

It's the same familiar cast of characters, the angels, the shepherds, Mary, Joseph, and of course, baby Jesus Himself. But there are two more who are mentioned but we barely notice they were there, or don't take much notice of their roles. One doesn't have a clue he has any role in it. The other knows everything.

The first is the great monarch of the Roman empire, Caesar Augustus.

But before we begin with him, let me make a slight detour and start with a little political statement. I imagine it's the last thing you want to hear at such a celebration, but it's gift wrapped in our reading today and it fits with the lack of awareness of Caesar Augustus, the first player in our account.

Maybe not all of us, but many of us have been watching the politics we have seen being played out recently. Some of us are content with what has happened and others of us are disturbed. But the question is, "Who's really in charge? What can man do to us? What can man do to God's Church? He has promised to preserve her. No matter what comes, God will do what we will need.

Case in point? Our first character, Caesar Augustus. Do you think he said, "How do I get Mary and Joseph down to Bethlehem so that Jesus can be born in his ancestor David's hometown, and make it look like it was a natural course of events? He's the emperor, the head of the entire empire, he could have simply ordered it, but he had no idea what was playing out. Nor would he have even cared.

Oh no. He's much too important for this piddly little thing. A destitute couple moving to a little town in a country whose claim to fame is that they are constantly rioting and revolting against the Roman rule for religious reasons. Pish posh. Why should the emperor care? It's much too small for him. He's way too important. He has much more important matters on his mind. He has a whole empire to run.

Find somebody else who isn't so important who doesn't have such important matters on His mind. Find somebody who merely controls the heavens and the earth. Never mind, the empire; who is in control of all the empire and its kingdoms, as well as all the lands and kingdoms that were not part of the empire, plus all of the natural world, the seas and everything in them, the stars and all the planets. Find that person to make sure Mary and Joseph get to Bethlehem. That would be our Lord. And he won't do it himself directly. He'll get Caesar to do it. He'll get Caesar to call for a registration or a census, and that will bring them down there. Now the Messiah is born in David's city, just as it had been prophesied.

Caesar didn't care, but it didn't matter that he didn't care. The Lord of all things shows he is in control of the politics--princes, kings, presidents, congress, judges, mayors--it doesn't matter. All of them are subject to Him, whether they intend to be or not, all for the sake of carrying out His will, which is to bless His church.

So, let me ask again. What can man do to us? What can man do to God's church? Whoever is in charge may have no idea when they will be used for His good purposes, but when the Lord needs them, He will.

And then there is God, the Lord Himself. We only have mention of Him and mostly a passive role. The angels praise God. Glory to God in the highest.

Perhaps when we talk about God in this case, we could specify and say the Father. When God is mentioned alone, it's the first person of the Trinity, the Father, the one who sends the Son.

When we pray and say "God," we are referring to the Father. This is why we address Him by saying, "through Jesus Christ," or "for the sake of your Son." We come to Him because the Son has provided the way to Him through His obedient suffering and then death. So, again, when we say "God," we mean the Father.

A standard of children's Christmas programs is the hymn, "God Loves Me Dearly." I've wondered how it got to be a standard for Christmas programs, because it doesn't really say anything about Christmas. But I remember singing it at my Christmas Eve services when I was a little boy, so it's been a Christmas program standard for at least 50 years.

So, I looked at the words a little more closely. What do you know? God in the “God loves me dearly” is talking about the Father, because when we get to the third stanza it says, “He sent forth Jesus, my dear Redeemer, He sent forth Jesus, and set me free.”

In fact, I’m convinced that even though it’s only talking about Him sending Jesus, that is how it became a standard for Christmas programs. He sent Him, which is what we celebrate today. And the words are awesome because it speaks about the most fundamental Law and Gospel concerns, but at a child’s level. So, here’s to more of that hymn in children’s programs!

But getting back to the Father. He plays a minor visible role in Luke’s account, but He is behind the scenes making all of it happen. Therefore, He has a huge role. We already noted how the creator had a part in getting Mary and Joseph down to Bethlehem.

Nine months before that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, God the Father became the father of this child. The Father sent the angels and gave them the words to make the announcement to the shepherds, even as the shepherds acknowledge He is the one who has made this known to them.

And when the shepherds leave the manger scene, they themselves having already told others about this fantastic news, glorify and praise God the Father for all He has done.

But as we heard in our first reading, this has been in the works since the beginning of time. We have seen the Father at work, along with the two other persons of the Trinity. The Father provides, the Son produces and the Holy Spirit plants the faith that believes these things. And it is all because we need this work initiated by the Father.

Yes, we need to be reminded that governments are in our Father’s control. What happened with Caesar Augustus is a great reminder of that. But much more do we need what happened because the Father manipulated history and the two other persons of the Trinity did their part.

Into history the Son was sent. On a literal evening, in real time, in a real town, God the Son become flesh was born. He became flesh because you

and I needed Him to come. We needed Him to come, so He could suffer and then die, and then rise again.

We needed that because we are real sinners, having come through the Advent season, having seen how to prepare the way for Him is to get out of the way by submitting to the death of our baptism and being raised to life again, through the work of the Holy Spirit.

So the Father who sent the Son, sent the Holy Spirit, so a group of shepherds would believe His words spoken by an angel that this child was born for them. And He continues to send His Holy Spirit so that we who have been made His children by His grace, would die daily in our baptisms, only to rise again just as often. And upon rising, believe in our hearts the very same as those shepherds, and confess it in song and with our lips on this most Holy Night and until we see Him in the flesh with our own eyes.

We are now getting set up to hear what He has to say to us tomorrow. AMEN

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. 9 The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. 14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son[d] from the Father, full of grace and truth.