

## On The Way to Bethlehem: Rome—A Place of Longing

Scripture: Luke 2:1-3; Romans 8:18-25

Today, we are entering one of my very favorite seasons in the church, the season of Advent. Advent is the season of four Sundays and weeks leading up to Christmas. The word “Advent” means “coming” in Latin and, when we let ourselves move beyond string lights and Christmas music, and really dig into the deeper meaning of this season, we find in Advent an invitation to preparation. We learn to wait. We learn to anticipate. We learn what it means to be on a journey, whether that’s a physical moving from place to place or it’s something more spiritual.

And this year, we’re using our Senior Pastor, Rob Fuquay’s book, “On the Way to Bethlehem” as a guide for our Sunday morning conversations. You might even be studying this book with a small group or reading it on your own. And over the next several weeks, we’re going to be exploring each place that’s highlighted in the Christmas story and see what we might learn from the people and places that we encounter on the way to Christmas.

And so today, we begin. Now, usually when we think of where the Christmas story begins, we think about Bethlehem, where Jesus is born in a manger. Sometimes we think about a conversation that Mary and Joseph had with an angel, bringing

news that was going to completely change their world. Maybe we take it out to the fields, where there's another angelic encounter, but this time with some shepherds...just normal people, showing up for work and having what was absolutely not a normal day at the office.

I like all of these pieces to the Christmas story. I like the familiar parts that we sing songs about—and I've been singing songs about these things since November 1 this year and I am not ashamed to admit it!

But here's the thing about the journey to Christmas: it actually begins in a slightly less expected place. The Christmas story actually begins in Rome. Specifically, in the chambers of the Roman government. It begins with the musings of an emperor, getting ready to send out a decree for a census, trying to figure out how to best showcase his power and physically count all the people from all the places who call the Roman Empire home.

When we look at what's happening in Rome, we might say that **(SLIDE) Christmas begins in a place where power and longing intersect.**

This is a little different than the angle we often take to look at the story of Jesus' birth and the days leading up to it. A lot of the time we focus on the many, many people in this story who don't really have any power at all. And, over the next few

weeks, we'll get there. But I like that we're starting in a slightly different place this week, because the concept of power...what it means to have it, what it means to use it well, what happens when it potentially harms people...this is the conversation we're having in our world right this minute.

In this post-election moment, we're having a collective conversation about what power means and how power is used. You've got people who are just elated...thinking everything will be fixed and exactly like they want it. And you've got other people who are just devastated. Afraid for what will be lost, afraid of potential harm, afraid of what comes next.

And no matter what kinds of conversations you're finding yourself in, or where your mind and spirit are right now, no matter if you feel that you are on the side of power or not...the truth is that power is a tricky thing. It's hard to navigate, it's hard to contain once it starts to grow. It's something we WANT...but once we have it, we don't always know how to steward it well. If we're not careful, power can warp the very good things it is supposed to uplift.

One of the classic examples of how power can get twisted is found in the Lord of The Rings series. Now, my confession to you this morning, and this WILL fundamentally change the way some of you think of me...I can take it...is that I cannot get through the Lord of the Rings books. I've tried, more than once,

and I just cannot do it. There's too much description and world building, and while I KNOW, in my heart, that these books are a work of brilliance, I need more action and for the plot to move quicker. BUT...I do like the movies. I know, I know, like 10 of you are going to line up after the service to tell me the book is better...but this is what I've got!

But, if you've read or watched any of The Lord of the Rings stories, it is a fantastic commentary on power, held within a tiny little ring. (Holds up ring). Just by TOUCHING this ring, it makes people go to a totally different place in their humanity. The potential of that power, it makes one man turn on and even kill his friend and then he becomes this creepy swamp creature. It makes other people question everything they've previously believed. It makes it really hard to do the kind, compassionate thing when power is... just... so... tempting.

And when Gandalf, the most innately powerful, and GOOD person in the story has the opportunity to take the ring, to have even more power, to even just be NEAR it, his response was "no way." He says:

*"Do not tempt me! I dare not take it, not even to keep it safe, unused. The wish to wield it would be too great for my strength. I shall have such need of it. Great perils lie before me."*

— J.R.R. Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring

Our relationship to power can wreck us. Whether we have it or feel like we're deeply lacking it, what we do with power reveals so much about the longings we carry in our hearts.

And sometimes I wonder if we would do almost ANYTHING to try and avoid longing. Because longing doesn't feel great. Just by being in a state of longing, we are admitting that things aren't the way we'd hope they would be. And if we could just get what we want, if we could just have our way, if things would just go the way we think they should go, if we could just have THAT power...then we wouldn't have to deal with this whole longing mess anymore.

Longing can really highlight the places where we aren't in control—whether that's our personal world or our bigger, wider world. And when we find ourselves in a place of longing, it's not hard to realize there's usually some kind of power in between us and what we want. Maybe it's a person, a system, it might even feel spiritual. Whatever it is, there's a point where our longing starts to grow, our agency feels limited, and where power can feel utterly out of reach.

This isn't just true in our world right now, but this was a major feeling shared by the people in Jesus' time. In this very moment, you've got Rome. And Rome was everywhere and in everything. This was a system, a government that was in charge, they were taxing and taking people's money, and while

there were some good things that came out of that, like roads and aqueducts, and an overall sense of peace...all of that came with the challenging truth that the people were just subjects. And because they were subjects, they didn't have a lot of authority and they probably had a whole lot of longing.

Longing for the chance to govern themselves. Longing to make the rules. And on an even deeper level, longing for this promise God had made generations ago, that a savior would come. Longing to see this story that they had been handing down, year by year, to actually come true.

They had to be really intentional about who they put their hope in. And so do we. Because **(SLIDE) If Rome is the object of our hope, we will often quit the journey before we get to Bethlehem.** If we're putting all of our trust in some kind of power from this world, if we're expecting all the problems and longings to be solved through those channels...we're going to be disappointed. We're going to be let down, repeatedly. We're probably going to give into despair and lose our hope.

We're going to forget the ways that Jesus works. We're going to forget that he shows up in places that are bleak. That he shows up when we think the story is over...and he keeps creating something better.

And when we start to forget, Jesus invites us to hold on tighter to him than the temporary powers of our world. Because if we

can do that, it can change the way we engage in the very real problems that we face. It can help us have the courage and commitment to be in these struggles for the long haul.

I was at a retreat for pastors a couple of weeks ago, and a big focus of our time together was how we care for our congregations in the wake of this recent election. How do we make the appropriate space? How do we heal division and help people of radically different viewpoints be in relationship with each other? How do we work for justice when it's needed? How do we find hope and encouragement even in moments that feel overwhelming and like we have very little power to influence change? What does the next faithful step look like right now?

**Nina Barnes (SLIDE)** was one of the speakers. She's a Spiritual Director and has worked in a variety of settings, including with college students. And she was working in Minneapolis when George Floyd was murdered. And her students, watching this unfold in their backyard, were FILLED with longing, as so many of us were. They were longing for something to be different. Longing for justice. And longing to be the ones who made change happen. And Nina supported them as they were organizing and getting ready to protest, but she also started to worry about them. Her biggest red flag came when some of the students said to her, a woman who had lived through the Civil

Rights Movement, “we’re going to be the ones to fix what your generation failed to do.”

And because of what she had lived through, because of the things she had seen, she knew this wasn’t going to be quick and easy work. And she watched, as the students encountered a deeply disappointing disrupted protest...many of them moved on in defeat.

And believe it or not, I was so encouraged by what she had to share. Here’s why—because she reminded us to find a bigger, longer lasting hope. Rome, power, it’s always going to be there! Something will always be happening in our world that breaks our hearts and makes us want to give up.

But Jesus’ story reminds us that Rome doesn’t get the final word and that God is at work. Look, a baby born to unmarried parents in a stable was on no one’s first century bingo card! And yet...there God was. Showing up and making change and speaking to longings that had been held by so many for so long.

Our longings are real. And so is God. I really love what that Romans passage we read today says and there's this line that just jumped off the page to me. Paul is talking about how we’re going to have suffering in our world, and the tension between suffering and hope and just how hard it can be to hang on in the middle of that whole chaotic mess. And then he says this:



**(SLIDE) *The creation waits with eager longing...* (Romans 8:19)**

It's that word EAGER for me. I don't know about you, but I need that reminder. When we long for things to be different, when we long for power to do the right thing, it's normal and right for it to feel like a lot. I need to remember that when I'm tempted to just check out. When I'm tempted to be numb. When I'm tempted to just be furious and walk away from it all.

Our longings invite us to feel something and to DO something. Even when it hurts. Even when the numbness or denial would be a lot easier and more attractive...that's not who God made us to be. We were designed to care in a big, real way that makes an impact on us. We were made to believe in something that matters; something that points us toward Jesus and the hope he brings.

And as we experience these longings, even when we feel like we don't have much power of our own, we can remember that what we DO have is a choice: **(SLIDE) we can give our deepest longings to the powers of this world, or we can give our longings to God.**

That doesn't mean we over-spiritualize and sidestep engaging in the needs of our world. It just means we change our perspective AS we engage. It means being fully present in the here and now and acknowledging the hard truth of this world...AND knowing, deep in our hearts, that we are part of a

story that is so much bigger than this single moment. It's an act of trust and faith to engage like that.

In Rob's book, he quotes a sermon by one of our former St. Luke's pastors, Dave Williamson. In an Advent Sermon several years ago, Dave said that we often want God to decree—to essentially say, "This is how it will be" and force it to happen—but that's not what God does. What we see in the Christmas story is that God births...and whether we like it or not, that's a longer, more painful process.

And so we WILL long. We will find ourselves wondering what power is up to and how we should respond. This has been true for generations and will be true long after we're gone. But in the middle of all of those real things, Advent reminds us...that God shows up. That Jesus is at work. And even when the work is slow, and God's presence feels mysterious...we have a real and good reason to have hope.

(Transition to Communion)