

Advent Devotional

by Peter Covington

Fighting the Bureaucracy

What was this census that begins the story of Jesus' birth? It was yet another Roman imperial interruption in the lives of ordinary people under its control for the benefit of the Empire rather than the citizens.

The Bible reports that the purpose of the census was to tax the populous. Roman taxation was something of a hit and miss affair, most likely catching people as they moved or engaged in commerce and mostly directed by what historians have described as "tax farmers," those men who taxed people as they saw fit in the moment and kept some of the tax for their own effort, passing on the rest in a fairly unregulated process.

So the census of Caesar Augustus temporarily put everyone in their hometown to be accounted for and taxed. We have no additional information about imperial instructions, tax rates or processes so we can assume that this system of tax farming worked locally, catching people who had returned home. But more than anything it was an attempt at bureaucratic order with no customer service center.

So Joseph and Mary complied and took the ninety-mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, probably very unsure what would happen next, except that the child would likely be born somewhere during this journey.



But aside from the difficulties of the parents to be, I find God's timing of this turn in world history ironic, even humorous, expressing contempt toward Caesar's plan for the world. Right in the middle of the Empire, in the middle of an important Imperial event, God marks the beginning of the end of the Imperial system.

Theologian Emil Bruner describes God's creation of the world as being separate from God's being, in fact as "over against himself." God's self-imposed rules seem to be a creation system that runs itself under sets of natural principles. However, God clearly does not exclude Godself from intervening with the birth of a Son, who from his birth through adulthood challenges the power structure of those who consider themselves to be in charge.

Herod senses this threat right away, since he has some knowledge of the workings of this God, and attempts to kill Jesus as an infant in order to protect his own place as King of the Jews, a puppet to the larger Roman imperium. Eventually, Jesus shows a different and better way as he gives himself for others and undermines and defies the supposed principles of order, power and authority.

Christmas is often a time when I realize the limits of my own power. I never have enough time or money to complete the "perfect" holiday that I imagine, but as a result, remember the joy and comfort of relationship, despite material plenty. Sometimes at Christmas, I turn into Caesar Augustus and seek to count and tax all that God has given me with little regard for God's sovereignty or the inconvenience I cause others. I confess this to you readers as an act of repentance and urge you to do the same.

God has given us what we need and in fact has set us up with plenty. This Advent, I want to and encourage all believers to give glory to God for all our blessings over and even against world systems that trap us into a materialistic milking of what we think is ours to control.