

THE HUNGER FOR JUSTICE

Texts: Luke 2:1-20; Isaiah 61:1-4

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Introduction

It won't be long before the Christmas cards start arriving. One we never grow tired of sending is one of the holy family – Mary pregnant or holding Jesus, and Joseph – on the back of a donkey, silhouetted against a night sky, perhaps with a great star in the background.

It seems so trusting and vulnerable. The picture exudes a sense of serenity and peace – and who doesn't need a bit of that.

Luke has the same picture on his Christmas card, but it's painted on a different background. Sixty-six years before Jesus' birth a messenger ran into the Roman senate and announced "the next ruler of the world is born". His name was Octavius, and he became the adopted son of Julius Caesar. At the age of 33 he ruled the entire empire. At his word ships sailed, armies moved, and many lived or died.

"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world." Don't miss the background of the Luke's Christmas card. A small child, whose family is caught up in a taxation census, is born in an unimportant village, in an unimportant part of the Roman Empire. And the only messengers sent were angels to a band of ragged shepherds.

Luke is saying that to tell the story of the Christmas family you must paint it on the canvas of a sixty-six year old Roman emperor who was called the ruler of the world, enforced the peace with an iron hand, and was worshiped as a god by many of his citizens. What is Luke doing?

He's playing politics, isn't he? Whoever this child is, this story can't be limited to one of comforting the hearts of stressed out individuals or promising heaven to the hopeless. His vulnerable birth rubs up against invulnerable Roman power. *It has worldwide significance.*

But what is it? What's going on in Luke's Christmas card?

1. Let's change scenes. If you put a few children in a room, put fewer toys in the room than children, and shut the door, you'll make a discovery. They are justice oriented creatures. It only takes a moment to hear "hey, that's not fair" echoing through the room.

We don't have to teach children that "justice" exists; they know injustice when they see it. Let me make a leap here. Human beings are hard-wired for justice. At some "buried in our bones" level we know that there are rights to be respected, duties to be honored; and it bothers us when we know that isn't happening.

To be sure we grow up and we learn how to dampen that sense of justice. The world is a complicated place and we learn how one's person's call for justice sometimes rubs up against another's. Start talking about justice and passionate argument is usually not far behind. So we often try not to talk about it all.

A few nights ago, my family went to see the movie "The Blindside" about a prosperous white family that gets to know a black teen from the wrong side of town. I won't give away the movie, (it's worth the ticket price) but suffice it say the family is not who you would expect to see holding a sign in a justice demonstration. But sometimes "justice" quits being a distant cause and gets a name, face, and address – and you find yourself caring about something that you never cared about before. It's happened to some of you.

N.T. Wright, a New Testament theologian, calls it an echo in our soul left by the one who created us. God is just, God is passionate about justice, and there's no way to be his creature and permanently remove that prodding, disturbing, echo from our consciousness – try as some of us might.

The prophet of Isaiah 61 is announcing the advent of God's justice – *good news to the poor, bind up the brokenhearted, freedom for the prisoners, release for the captives, and the day of vengeance of our God.* God is hardly neutral when it comes to caring about justice.

And God is hardly neutral when it comes to us and our need for justice. The reason God is bringing justice to Israel in the midst of their captivity, is that they will themselves become the just people God seeks.

They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord, for the display of his splendor. Righteous folk are people who try to live out God's justice among themselves and other. God means for his passion to be shared, not simply worshiped.

So we hunger for justice; we're made that way. We can't get that echo out of our heads.

2. Now the fact that people are made for justice doesn't seem to mean they are very good at. The injustice of other people never seems to quit astounding us. And then there's that problem of our own injustice.

We only have to mention Hitler or the Holocaust to wonder how that could ever have happened. Where the justice? Never again we say. But it happens again and again. Nobody stopped the Hutu's and Tutsi's in Rwanda from killing each other in enormous numbers. Genocide happened again.

Those of us who grew up in the south know more than we'd like about racial prejudice. But it wasn't until I moved to Colorado that I discovered the hard truth about what was done to Native Americans in the westward expansion. And if we travel the world we see the same story played out among different peoples. It's a problem hardly unique to Americans.

We shake our heads at the violence of Islamic extremism. There a few folks we like to take to the woodshed for their irresponsibility and greed in our own recession. Where's the justice we ask? We aren't bad, when we listen to the voice in our heads, pointing out where justice isn't.

One of the comforting things about shaking my head at the world is that it gets me off the hook of shaking it at myself. I don't know about you, but when it comes to justice I frequently talk a better game than I play. The Apostle Paul said it this way:

I do not understand what I do...For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do- this I keep on doing. (Rom. 7:15, 19)

My problem, and your problem, is not that most of us are as bad as we could be. It's that none of us are as good as we should be. We're better at naming injustice than we are at fixing it because the line between justice and injustice isn't mainly between us and them. It runs right through the middle of my heart.

We can't live without justice. And it seems we don't live to comfortably with it either. We recognize other peoples' problems far better than we recognize our own. We hear the echo of God's passion bouncing around in our heads. But it struggles to become our passion.

We've got this song stuck in our heads. It won't go away. But we still don't know how to sing it very well. It led the Apostle Paul to write, *What a wretched man I am!* (Rom. 7:24) What do we say?

- 3. In case you think I've forgotten let's get back to Luke's Christmas card. Maybe the baby on the card was born to do something more than comfort the hearts of the harried and stressed. Maybe the baby on the cover was born against the background of Roman injustice because he came to answer our hunger for God's justice.**

When Jesus was ready to explain himself, he quotes God's passion for justice in Isaiah 61 and announces that it is his own. In the fourth chapter of Luke's Gospel he says:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And if we have any doubts, he goes on to say, "*Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.*" (Luke 4:21)

Jesus came to put the voice to our echo. He came to show us God's justice in the lives of people. He came to bring God's justice to us. And he came so that we would live out God's justice – be the righteous people we were created to be.

Jesus was born against the background of Roman injustice so that there would be no doubt that God had something else in mind.

Jesus was born to stoke God's passion in our hearts. To bring that echo for justice to fever pitch in our lives and make a way for the dream to begin to become a bit of a reality. He does that by dying under the weight of our sinful injustice, and freeing us to live out the passion for righteousness God has placed in our hearts.

If Jesus came to do anything it all it was to make us hungry. For a few brief years he showed the world the justice of God in all its laughter and all its tears. He showed us the agony and ecstasy of sharing God's passion. And he left us the blueprint for doing the same.

Spiritually speaking Jesus came to leave a taste in our mouths for something better than any of us have ever done, something more gloriously godly than the world has ever seen.

Here's the back-story of Luke's political Christmas card. If we are to hunger for the things of God we cannot confuse the Caesar with the Savior. The man seated on the throne must bow to the man who hung on the cross, in this and every age. And so must our greatest loyalty and deepest desire.

- 4. This is the first Sunday in Advent, and I need to invite you to do two things at once. The first is to celebrate the justice that God has brought already. The second is hunger deeply for the transformation of what does not yet reveal God's justice in our lives or in the world.**

The world's Christmas party started a few weeks ago. I turned on the radio and heard "It's The Most Wonderful Time of the Year" before I could move the jack-o-lantern off of the front porch steps. And the world is fifty-percent right.

This is the most wonderful time of the year when God wrapped his passion for justice in flesh and sent him to bring righteousness to an unrighteous world. To bear the weight of our injustice so that we might be free to live out his justice. He came to make us right with God, show us mercy, so that we can be servants of God's passions and not God's enemies. Thanks be to God!

But the world is always fifty percent wrong this time of year. It's also a time to remember with tears and some longing how bad we need the Savior because our world and our lives are often far from the justice and righteousness God intends. Until Jesus comes back the struggle will not end.

It's time to dust off our dormant hunger for a better world, for a better me, and bring it again to Jesus and ask him again to do in me and through me what I cannot. It's time to ask for a little justice.

Conclusion

Let us give thanks in the weeks ahead for every slavery defeated, every prejudice overcome, every apartheid ended, every Berlin Wall toppled, every sinner forgiven, every hungry belly fed, and every incarnation of Caesar who no longer persecutes his people, because the justice of Jesus was such that these things could not stand.

And let us pray with longing hearts for every prejudice that remains, every tyrant who still lords it over his people, every belly still hungry at night, and every sinner who still needs peace with God, because the justice of Jesus won't let us do otherwise.