

**"The Decrees of Dust Men and of Divine
Messengers"**

Luke 2:1

24 December Anno Domini 2003

The Festival of the Nativity of Our Lord

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church of Emmett, Idaho

Pastor Michael L. McCoy

Grace, mercy and peace to you in the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Dear Baptized,

Behold, the sermon text for this Festival of the Incarnation of Our Lord is a portion of the first verse of the Gospel Reading. Please listen to that short section of Holy Writ and then hear "The Decrees of Dust Men and of Divine Messengers" ...

"In those days a decree went out."

Thus far the Word of the LORD our God.

Behold, on this holy night, wherein we gather to hear the Good News of our Redeemer's Birth, the Christmas Eve Gospel begins with a decree. And one man or another, whether here or there, might think, "Well, so what? Decrees are made all the time." Ahh, this is most certainly true. In fact, decrees are made today just as they were in the days when Quirinius was governing Syria. Some decrees are joyful, some sad; some disheartening, some glad; some lucid, some mad. The insane? Oh yes. In those days a decree went out from Herod ...

"... that all the principal men of the entire Jewish nation, wheresoever they lived, should be called to him. Accordingly, there were a great number that came, because the whole nation was called and all men heard of this call, and death was the penalty of such as should despise the epistles that were sent to call them. And now the king was in a wild rage against them all, ... and when they were come, he ordered them all to be shut up in the hippodrome."

(Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 17:6:5)

Then the king decreed that, in order that there be sufficient mourning and grieving and crying at the time of his death - and knowing that no one would mourn or grieve or weep at his death - Herod ordered all of the prominent members thus shut up in the hippodrome to be slaughtered. While the wicked king died, his order was not carried out. The major of the people rejoiced in the death of this man who was but dust and who had returned to the same. But such was but one decree of King Herod.

Those who were not kings; they also made decrees. In those days of Caesar Augustus, one man sat in

two-fold darkness and expressed his personal hope of a savior. He wrote a good news decree at the birth of his god. I've got it right here. Listen to it:

"Whereas the Providence which has guided our whole existence and which has shown such care and liberality, has brought our life to the peak of perfection in giving to us Augustus Caesar, whom it filled with virtue for the welfare of mankind, and who, being sent to us and to our descendants as a savior, has put an end to war and has set all things in order; and whereas, having become visible, Caesar has fulfilled the hopes of all earlier times . . . not only in surpassing all the benefactors who preceded him but also in leaving to his successors no hope of surpassing him; and whereas, finally, that the birthday of the god (Augustus) has been for the whole world the beginning of the gospel concerning him, therefore, let all reckon a new era beginning from the date of his birth, and let his birthday mark the beginning of the new year."

Priene Inscription, Letter of the Proconsul to the Cities of Asia (9 B.C.)

Ahh, but this Caesar is neither the One True God nor the Savior of the whole world. Indeed, neither in this Augustus nor in any mortal begotten by man and born of woman is the birthday of God. These are all dust men and here be no gospel.

Thus a husband and wife plodded along in the dust and darkness of the Judean night. In their own way, they had, hours earlier fulfilled the royal decree issued centuries earlier by Cyrus of Persia who proclaimed ...

"Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, ... Whoever is among you of all His people, May His God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah." (Ezra 1:2-3).

But they passed by Jerusalem and continued on the road to Bethlehem for in those days a decree had gone forth

"from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary his betrothed, who was with child."

Now we must be clear on this decree by Caesar Augustus. The translation that we are so familiar with is rather soft ... "a decree went out that all the world should be enrolled." This was neither optional nor advisory, as we might say, "a public service announcement has been issued that everyone 'should' get a flu shot." The Greek word for "decree" is "dogma" and denotes required acceptance. If you do not do this, then you are no friend of Caesar's. Such enemies have neither long nor happy futures. If you disobey the law of man you might die the death that man can impose here in this temporal world.

But Joseph understood his responsibilities to the law of man and the kingdom of this world. As long as obedience to the commands of the state did not conflict with the commandments of God, then he would render unto Caesar that which was due to Caesar. Therefore, the Galilean carpenter brought his wife and her unborn Child to Bethlehem according to the dogma of Caesar and the decree of

Augustus.

Thus far the decrees of dust men. The Divine also decrees and His Word is dogma as well; so behold, "the LORD God formed man from the dust of the earth, and breathed into his nostrils the Breath of Life; and man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). What glorious goodness as the Word issues forth and the Spirit accomplishes the creation of man! What heights of joy to the world at the decree of creation! But likewise the disobedience of Jehovah's Word results in the consequent death declaration wherein clay and soul separate unto eternal destruction. Or, in the words of the Word, the fatal decree, "Thou art dust, and to dust thou shalt return" (Genesis 3:19).

Death. Never intended by God. He gave Life. We went the way of death. Death, this splitting of the Adam ... this gut-wrenching separation of body and soul is not natural, for God never intended it, and did not create us for it. Though Jehovah did know beforehand exactly what would happen, still He did not will it. While not natural, death is normal; each one born of the union of a man and a woman dies. Such is the wage of sin, and all die and return to dust because of Sin and because of sins.

Listen, for there is a Divine decree that is older than "in the beginning." One of God's messengers, a man named Peter, informs us of it through his first epistle. The Divine Council, in eternity, decreed that the Son would be the Savior and "He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world" (1 Peter 1:20). Therefore, "God so loved the world that He gave His Only-Begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

This promised Redeemer - who was ordained in eternity and conceived in time - is incarnate by the Holy Ghost and carried in the womb of a Jewish maiden. Dearly beloved, behold now the "Divine dust" Who is begotten of His Father from eternity and born of the Virgin Mary. The Savior, Who would be named Jesus, is bundled up and delivered in and given to a dark world. "This is He Whom seers in olden time, promised of with one accord." This is the Redeemer Who is born King of the Jews - sought after by wise men and madmen - by Jew and Gentile. This is the same Redeemer Who is pinned to the cross with the same superscription - Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. This One Who slumbers in a manger, will sabbath in a tomb following the earth-wrenching separation of His Body and Soul of the Word made flesh. Jesus commends His Spirit into the hands of His Father after He has paid the price for the sins of the world ... yours included. The earth quakes, rocks split, the curtain of holiness is torn and in that dark Day, there is no silent night.

Just as the womb of woman could not hold her Creator beyond the allotted time; neither could the tomb of rock restrain the Lord of Life. On the third day, Bethlehem's greater Son rose again from the dead and defeated death and the grave in doing so. This is the Good News for us descendants of Adam. Through this Gospel, and faith which trusts such Word of God, we are now sons of God ... male and female ... sons of God ... Jews and Gentiles ... sons of God ... aged or infants ... sons of God.

Or, as the Scriptures decree,

"The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are made of dust; and as is the heavenly Man, so also are those who are heavenly. And as we have borne the image

of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man" (1 Corinthians 15:47-49).

There are but two decrees to consider this night. Both of them are absolutely vital; most assuredly necessary; without a doubt to be declared.

The first is the decree of the Divine Messenger proclaimed that evening in the spoken Word of the Christmas Angel and then Hallelujahed by the hymning choir of angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. The one Divine Messenger announced the heavenly dogma to earthy shepherds ... "Fear not! For behold I bring you glad tidings of a great joy which will be to all the people. For there is born to you this day in the City of David, a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord." Emmanuel, the Word that means "God with us," is born!

And yet this is not enough. Though the Savior be born a thousand times it would do us no good unless the shepherds knew where to find Him and though they might have searched for Him in the City of David would they have thought to look for the King of the Universe in a manger? Indeed, these shepherds needed to know where the Lord of lords could be found so they could come into His Presence with joy and thanksgiving. Thus the heaven sent angel continues, "And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men!'"

And yet this is not enough. The shepherds need one more Christmas gift ... the Holy Spirit given gift of faith which trusts the promise of God. Such a Divine gift was wrought in the shepherds who "said to one another, 'Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.'"

That was the first decree to consider this night. The second is the decree of the ordained messenger proclaimed this evening in the spoken Word. This one announces the same heavenly dogma to the same dusty people; that is ... "Fear not! For behold I bring you glad tidings of a great joy which is for all the people. For there was born to you this day in the City of David, a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord." Emmanuel, the Word that means "God with us," is born ... is come ... was crucified for the sins of the world ... is born again from the tomb ... is alive ... is ascended and is with us! And to those who trust such Word of God, behold, another Divine decree is based on this Good News of a great joy; namely, you are forgiven of all your sins in the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.