

**THE PEACEKEEPER**  
**A SERMON PREACHED AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH GREENWICH**  
**DECEMBER 9, 2007--SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT**  
**SECOND IN A SERIES--NATIVITY NARRATIVES**  
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**THE LESSON FOR THE DAY--LUKE 2:1-7**

Well, to quote my sometimes friend and sometimes arch-enemy, Mark Antony: "Friends, Romans, countrymen: lend me your ears."

Oh, allow me to introduce myself. Back in the year 63 B.C., I was born with the name Gaius Octavianus, Octavian for short, but perhaps you know me better by the name grateful Romans gave me during what turned out to be a very long and very successful tenure as leader of the unfree world--Augustus is what they called me--the Exalted One. Caesar Augustus. I've also been called Rex, Imperator, Princeps, Pontifex Maximus, and, believe it or not, the son of a god.

63 B.C. Long time ago. Here we are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and actually that's one of the things I wanted to talk to you about this morning. Frankly it's been one of my most annoying vexations these last 2000 years; I cannot for the life of me fathom why on earth you people date your calendars by the birth of some peasant from a backwater town in the countryside. What has gotten into you? What was wrong with the old calendar in which Year One was the founding of Rome, the Eternal City? You know, really this is the 28<sup>th</sup> century.

One of the many indignities heaped upon my august head as a result of your devotion to this wretched carpenter is the fact that for all eternity, the years of my life will straddle this artificial division of time into B.C. and A.D. Caesar Augustus, born 63 B.C.; died 14 A.D. To date the life of a great man by such a non-event, to consider **that** the center of history. It is simply inscrutable.

Well, at least you still have a month named after me, not to mention one named after my uncle and

hero, Julius Caesar, and, if I do say so myself, they are probably the two best months of the year, don't you agree?

Well, maybe that's a conversation for another day. The main reason I wanted to talk to you Americans is that if my guess is right, you are my kindred spirits. I come as a Peacekeeper to the Peacekeepers. Rome: the world's only superpower. America: the world's only superpower.

I was, you are, the world's policeman. It fell to me, it falls to you, to stamp out the brush fires of ethnic squabbles, the bloody civil wars, the troublesome international skirmishes which threaten the world's peace. My spies were better than yours. Good Lord, Al Qaeda, Iraq, Iran: can't you get anything right?

Still, you are what I was: the world's policeman. And I come to you as a peacekeeper to the peacekeepers. No doubt you've heard of the *Pax Romana*, that long epoch of world-wide rest and peace and prosperity which began at my instigation, and lasted for 200 long and glorious years. The *Pax Romana*--the peace of Rome.

I must humbly point out that sometimes it is called the *Pax Augustae*--the peace of Augustus. And now, you and your government are presiding over what is sometimes called the *Pax Americana*--the peace of America. I will pray for you. I will pray that the *Pax Americana* lasts as long as the *Pax Augustae*.

In your case, as in mine, it is a peace gained only through strength, yes? Peace can only come through strength, isn't that right? You know, I admire you Americans. I admire you because you

could have disbanded much of your military when your arch-enemy, the Communist Empire, disintegrated before your very eyes. But you did not. You had the courage and resolve to maintain strength in a time of peace, because that is the only way peace is maintained.

I think it's quite interesting that you have a nuclear missile called the Peacekeeper, and a nuclear submarine called the *Corpus Christi*, the body of Christ. I admire you because you find no paradox in that nomenclature. You seem to recognize the connections between times of peace, and instruments of war. I like that in a nation.

I notice that your Emperor Bush is not at all bashful about sending troops or bombs into a troubled part of the world not far from my old stomping grounds.

Of course, it might be a lot easier for him if he'd earned his stripes on the battlefield back when he was a young man, as I did, rather than going AWOL from the National Guard. Before him there was Emperor Clinton, who didn't even have the guts for the National Guard, the lilly-livered little Willy.

Don't you think generals make the best leaders? Think of the long, glorious list—David, Alexander, my uncle Julius, Henry V, Bonaparte, Washington, Grant, Eisenhower.

And now look at the characters you are thinking of electing as your next leader:

Giuliani: did not serve.

Obama: did not serve.

Romney: did not serve.

Edwards: did not serve.

Thompson: did not serve.

Governor Clinton, a civilian, defeats honorable soldiers like Daddy Bush and Bob Dole; W, an AWOL Guard, defeats Gore, a soldier, and Kerry, a soldier. Shouldn't a man be a warrior before he becomes emperor, king, or President? Peace through strength, right? And is it true that your

next emperor might be a woman? Say it ain't so. Don't go sissy on me, you Americans.

May I suggest General Powell or Captain McCain? Hanging from the rafters by your elbows: that qualifies a man to be leader of the free world, especially when he promises never to do anything like it to his enemies.

Well, I shouldn't dabble in politics, should I? As I said, I was born in 63 B.C. to a noble and senatorial family, but my father died when I was four years. I never knew him. An early tragedy, my loss turned out to be my greatest good fortune; the gods were already molding my destiny. Because when I was 19, my great uncle Julius Caesar adopted me as his son and named me his heir apparent, and this he did just before he was knifed down by those dastardly Republicans, those assassins, Brutus and Cassius. "Et tu, Brute?" Remember the line?

At first I shared the power I'd inherited from my Uncle Julius with Antony and Lepidus in a sort of three-way presidency, a triumvirate.

The first thing we did was, well, we cleaned house. We got rid of our opponents. I mean, sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do. I'm not exactly proud of everything I did, but, you know the world was in desperate trouble, and I was, after all, just 20 years old. Perhaps I hadn't quite yet learned the subtler diplomacies of my maturity, especially that time Antony and I executed 300 senators on an altar erected to my father Julius Caesar. Well, sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do. Peace through strength, you know what I mean?

Anyway, this triumvirate, this three-way presidency, didn't last very long. The first to go was Lepidus, an old soldier who was as tone deaf to political nuance as Trent Lott himself. Antony and I ruled in a kind of uneasy friendship, a restless, apprehensive coalition, but you know what happened to him. He was a handsome, silver-tongued orator, a playboy reared in the lap

of luxury, too much in love with the finer things of life, and as with so many men of his ilk, he had one huge, glaring, crippling weakness—women.

He was married to my sister Octavia, and right under his wife's nose, right under my sister's nose, he starts fooling around with the Queen of Egypt. You've seen the movie, haven't you? He fell hook, line, and sinker for her considerable sexual and psychological charms and basically lost his mind, or at least handed it over to her along with everything else he owned.

My God, the man was like a lovesick puppy in the arms of that woman. She could make him do **anything**. He finally divorced his wife, my dear sister, and moved to Egypt with Cleopatra and lived there with her in an obscene luxury which would have made Paris Hilton blush. And well, the last straw was when Antony decided in a fit of romantic hysteria to hand over several Roman colonies to Cleopatra and her children.

And that was it. I was not about to let that snake Cleopatra become empress of Rome. I declared war. Under my command were 600 ships of war, 43 legions of Roman soldiers, 200,000 men under arms. I was 32 years old.

We dispatched the traitor Antony in the Battle at Actium. And then, even the land of the Pharaohs became a Roman colony. And I was left alone as the sole leader of the civilized world. And thus commenced the *Pax Romana*, the peace of Rome. And it lasted for something like 200 years. Did I tell you I was 32 years old at the time?

And I do not mean to boast, but let me tell you about some of my accomplishments. This is not ego; this is history. During my reign, Rome became the most powerful empire the world had ever seen. The empire stretched from Gibraltar in the west to Jerusalem in the east, from the Nile in the south, to the Seine in the north, and the Mediterranean Sea became a Roman lake—*Mare Nostrum*, we called it, "Our Lake." Rome colonized western Europe. Latin became the *lingua franca*

of the known world, and that's why French, Spanish, and Italian are called Romance, or Roman, languages. The very words you use every day are the direct result of my regime. Your culture is founded on my conquests.

But I was not just a warrior. I was also a statesman. My people were my chief concern. In Rome I created the first postal service, and don't blame me for the deterioration since then (41¢ for a stamp!). I created the first police force, and the first fire department, which had obviously gone bad by the time of Nero, but let that pass.

I inaugurated an elaborate highway system connecting the far corners of the empire, rid the seas of pirates, imported and subsidized grain for the urban poor of Rome. Literature flourished during my reign—Vergil and Horace, Livy and Ovid; the names speak for themselves. Roman architecture became the world's standard. I found Rome brick and left it marble.

It is possible that no world leader in history has left a more indelible, constructive mark upon the contours of world history.

And yet, and yet, in the end, for all the majestic glories of my regime, for all the splendid honors of my imperial dominion, despite titanic military triumphs, astonishing political miracles, and unequalled cultural exploits, my greatest fame comes because I am mentioned once, just once, in passing, really, almost as a footnote, in a thin little biography, nothing more than a pamphlet, really, authored by one called Luke the Physician.

"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be enrolled, each in the city of his birth. And Joseph also went from Nazareth in Galilee to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, with Mary, his betrothed, who was great with child. While they were there, the time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in

a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn."

The children, the children, they know my name because they commit it to their hearts, this little narrative of your vulnerable God, the story of the birth of your so-called Savior.

How in the world did it come to pass that all my international exploits came to be SWALLOWED UP as a footnote in the account of this humble birth of a carpenter from a hick town at the end of the Roman world? Why worship you him as a god? Somehow this Luke, this, this doctor, has turned all history around with his crafty propaganda. How did this happen?

Did you know that the words you use to describe this Jesus were originally spoken of me? This Luke, this physician, he stole all the honors and epithets rightfully mine and appended them to this Jesus, this workingman. Did you know that the words of the angel in Luke's angel song were originally sung in honor of my reign? Did you know that they called me the son of a god? Did you know that on my birthday, September 23, on my birthday, the people of Rome celebrated the great day by singing "The birthday of the god has marked the beginning of good news for the whole world"? Did you know that they called me "The Savior of the whole world"?

And now this clever Luke turns all history on its head, and the angels sing, "Do not be afraid, for I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for the whole world, for there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord." **His** birthday good news? **He** the Savior of the whole world?

How did Luke succeed in making not Rome, but Bethlehem, the center of history? Why do you celebrate not September 23, but December 25? Why do they now call him the Prince of Peace, and why speak they now not of the *Pax Augustae*, but the *Pax Christi*, the Peace of Christ? How did it happen that all the Temples I erected to the gods

of Rome have become basilicas honoring that man? How did this happen? Whatever happened to "peace through strength?"

What on earth is your strange God up to? Why has he "scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly?" Why has he "filled the hungry with good things, and the rich has he sent empty away?"

Well, these are my questions, and I've come to talk to you today so that you would be aware of the kind of God you serve. That God does not honor the rules of the nations, because the rules of the nations say that the strong always win. That God does not honor the strong. That God thinks you can have peace through weakness, through suffering, through dying. I want you this morning to ask yourselves precisely where salvation comes from—a throne, or a manger? A crown, or a cross? I want you to ask yourselves this morning who precisely is the Savior of the World. Do you want a Savior like him? Do you want a Savior who is willing to kill, or one who is willing to die? A little child shall lead them, indeed! Do you think that will work?

When I was 33 years old, the people of Rome bestowed upon me the title of Augustus, the Exalted One. At the age of 33, I was the sole Emperor of the civilized world. At the age of 33, **he** was hanging from a cross on a garbage heap called Golgotha, the Place of the Skull. The difference could not be more pronounced.

The choice is yours. What is your strange God up to? You don't want to lay your life at an altar to the wrong god, do you?