

A decree went out from Emperor Augustus.

That's how Luke begins the story of Jesus' birth. The most powerful person in the world ordered a census. He wanted to know how many people he ruled over and to make sure that he could squeeze every ounce of taxes, every ounce of loyalty out of the people he conquered. Like most of the emperor's decrees, it caused quite a bit of hardship on the common, everyday people – people like Mary and Joseph. This decree meant that Mary had to travel many miles while nearing the time to give birth. It meant that she and Joseph could find no accommodation other than a place to house animals.

It was a decree to go and be counted but it was really a decree that said the emperor, and people like the emperor – the rich, the powerful – are all that matter and everyone else must order their lives around those decrees. Mary and Joseph and the majority of the people who lived under Roman occupation were hurting, they were oppressed, but maybe, more than anything, they were tired. Imagine how exhausting it must be to know that at any moment, no matter what is going on with your life, the emperor can order you to stop whatever it is you're doing, end whatever plans you've made, and then do something else entirely because he decided to issue a decree. It would be exhausting.

We don't live in the ancient Roman Empire. There's not a single individual who can upend our lives with one edict. And yet, we know what it is to have life upended, don't we? We have lost more than 800,000 lives in our country to COVID and are nearing 6 million deaths across the world. Many of us have personally lost people we love to this devastating pandemic. And even those of us who haven't—the lucky ones—have had our lives upended in ways we could have never imagined. Loss of jobs and income, the long isolation of being separated from friends and family, trying to juggle remote school with learning how to do work in a new way. In our own household, I can't tell you how many times Mary Page or I or even our nine year old daughter Nina have said, "I'm so tired of this pandemic."

And I think maybe what makes it so exhausting is how many times we thought it would be over. I remember when everything first shut down thinking, "Ok, we just have to make it to the summer and things will be better." Or then if we can just make it to the vaccines, we can get back to normal. Or maybe when the kids can be vaccinated. And on and on we go. It seems like every time we've made it to what we thought was the other side, another COVID variant, another COVID surge happens. Even earlier this week, I wasn't even sure if we would be able to go through with this service as the numbers aren't looking great. So much of the time, it feels like we are at the complete mercy of forces beyond our control.

In a way, then I feel like we may be able to relate a little more to what life must have been like for Mary and Joseph than any Christmas in my lifetime. Like them, we are surely tired and weary of having our life upended by a force we have little to no control over.

But the emperor's decree was not the only decree that was issued 2000 years ago.

There was another decree made by a power much higher than the emperor. On that first Christmas night, the God who created heaven and Earth decided to make common cause with all of humanity. That night, the God of the universe, came down and was born into this world as a homeless baby, the son of an unwed teenage mother.

The Christmas story in Luke ends with amazement and rejoicing. Shepherds who had been awake all night, travelled all the way to Bethlehem to worship the new born babe, leave the manger filled with joy. Mary, in awe of the shepherds visit and their story of angels singing in the fields, pondered the mystery that she had birthed into the world and held the love and awe of that moment close in her heart. Mary and Joseph were no doubt exhausted. So too were the shepherds. But my guess is what they remembered most during that time was not how tired they were, not the decree of the emperor, but rather that God had burst into their world in the most unlikely of ways. The emperor was still on the throne, their lives were still hard, but somehow, they just seemed to know that the uncertainty and hardships of their lives and the whims of the emperor would not have the last word. God would have the last word. And they rejoiced.

I love the Christmas Eve service. For me, it's the most meaningful service of the year. I love the stunning music. The story of Jesus' birth is my favorite story to preach. And I was so sad that we would not be able to have an in-person Christmas Eve service last year. I even thought I might not watch the live stream because I thought, "What's the point? This is yet another thing that COVID has taken from me." But at the last minute, Mary Page and I decided we would turn on the service—maybe more out of duty than anything else.

Last year, our family sat on our couch, wearing our pajamas. We heard the familiar hymns and the story that we hear every year. Sure, it was different. Our kids were jumping on the couch and, at times, dancing to the hymns. But as I heard the Christmas story sung and spoken, as I saw the sheer fun our kids were having as they jumped and danced, as I looked at Mary Page and we smiled at each other, I knew that in spite of it all, joy still breaks through.

Friends, the story we celebrate tonight is not a story of God intervening to make all of life's hardships go away. We still live in a world of violence and greed, a world of pandemics and a changing climate, a world of deadly gun violence and devastating storms, a world of inequality and injustice. But the story we celebrate tonight is that in such a world, life and hope are still born anew, that God enters into this world and our lives with all of its brokenness and journeys alongside us.

2000 years ago, an emperor issued a decree. And today, a pandemic continues to rage. But tonight we celebrate another decree that declares that no ruler, no plague, no tragedy ever has the last word.

"For unto us a child is born...and a weary world rejoices."