

*Lost Verses of Famous Carols*  
***Those Days=These Days***  
*Luke 2:1*

**First Presbyterian Church  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**Christmas Eve, AD 2020  
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And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. In those days, Caesar made a decree. What else is new? It's what Caesars do, isn't it? They make decrees. They order us and their soldiers enforce. They speak and we have to do what they say. Caesars come in all shapes and sizes.

- Could be the coach that seems to enjoy your running laps.
- Could be a president issuing executive orders.
- Could be the voice on the other end of the phone deciding whether you're covered for a procedure.
- Could be the boss who wants to see that report by Monday morning.

*Little Caesar's* : It's not just a pizza chain! They're everywhere.

Growing up, we generally viewed the police that patrolled our neighborhood as friendly and trustworthy. They helped keep domestic tranquility while not being intrusive. The assumption was that we were all decent people. One year, though, Officer Reinke entered the scene. One afternoon, while we were playing football, he drove his squad car across the sidewalk and into our backyard. He then berated my friend for yelling at his sister. Never mind that she was the older sister who'd been bullying her brother. Another time, Officer Reinke happened to pull up while I was lighting an illegal bottle rocket. While my friends laughed from their hiding places in the bushes, Reinke gave me an interminable lecture on the dangers of fireworks, replete with numerous tedious examples of boys who'd lost all manner of appendages while lighting such contraband. Not long after, Officer Reinke ticketed my very cautious father who was driving home from a church elders' meeting at three miles over the speed limit. But then, Mr. Reinke reached too far. He stopped my mother and proposed to give her a ticket for a stop sign violation. Officer Reinke soon learned that my mother never had nor ever would receive a traffic violation. Lois Dawson doesn't get tickets. And I don't recall ever hearing from Officer Reinke again. Little Caesar had met his Cleopatra.

The decrees of Caesar continue. The reality is that not many of them fade away like Officer Reinke. The dominators can make us do things.

- The tyrants at work exhaust us.
- HR departments lean hard on us if we have an opinion deemed offensive.
- The controllers at home suffocate us.
- The chronically offended take the fun out of everything.
- The influencers on social media persuade us what we like and buy.
- The news outlets tell what they think is important and don't show us what they don't want us to see.

In those days there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus. *Those days equal these days*. The powerful of all types want us to believe that the world is the way they say it is. What matters is what they say matters. Your livelihood, social standing and even safety depend on accepting this view of things.

But the gospel tells a different story. A subversive story. From 2000 miles away, Caesar Augustus decreed that everyone had to return to his hometown to be registered for a tax. And they had to go. This was the big news of the day. The whole world was in motion to comply with the decree. Caesar moved the pieces on the board. But the little story in Luke's gospel reveals that our God was actually in control. The ancient prophecy decreed that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. As a descendent of David, Joseph would have to register for the tax in the city where David had lived: Bethlehem. Now ordinarily Joseph would never have undertaken the rough three day journey from where he lived in Nazareth with a wife who was nine months pregnant. Caesar didn't care about discomfort or miscarriages. The decree was the decree. Little did Caesar know that he was ensuring the fulfillment of the prophecy about the Messiah's birth. The King of kings would in a few generations supplant the emperor in the hearts of men. God was working underneath the tyrant's decrees to accomplish his purposes.

On a dark night in a tiny town God himself entered the world. Using apparently insignificant and powerless people, the world's true King made his appearance. The humble carpenter and his young wife sheltered among the farm animals. The shepherds made their midnight way to see the child. No one in the world who mattered even knew it happened. But our God was working everything according to his plan. Things are actually *not* the way the world shouts at us. The dominators are merely bullies pretending they know. For God was up to something that first Christmas. He still is. Quiet. Under the nose of Caesar. Away from the listening devices of a surveillance society. Where none of the powerful are looking. God slips into the world with a life transforming agenda.

On Christmas Eve in the beautiful Austrian mountains in 1818, Father Joseph Mohr learned that his church organ could not be repaired before the evening service. He tried not to let the anxiety overwhelm him. Instead, the pastor went for a walk, and noticed how still his snow laden town lay nestled in the mountains. Quickly, he wrote the words to “Silent Night.” He brought the fresh lyrics to his choir director and asked if he could set them to music before the service (I guess pastors have been squeezing choir directors for a long time!). Using a guitar instead of the broken organ, “Silent Night” was sung on Christmas Eve in the peaceful dark of an Alpine town. The carol raises the hope of peace on earth. One of the biggest Little Caesars, Napoleon Bonaparte, had recently been defeated and Austria was free again. In a little sung verse, Mohr celebrates how God specializes in working under the nose of all pompous earthly powers.

Silent Night! Holy Night!  
By his love, by his might  
God our Father us has graced  
As a brother gently embraced  
Jesus, all peoples on earth  
Jesus, all peoples on earth.<sup>1</sup>

Mohr tells us how the true Sovereign, God our Father, actually expressed his power on Christmas day. The power of God’s Fatherly love has overflowed into the world as Jesus arrives. Because Jesus the Son of God entered the world as our brother. He embraced us by becoming one of us. He entered the world where Caesar makes decrees and declared, “I will go through this with you. As one of you. I will make a faithful way in the midst of all Caesar’s edicts. I will show you what my Father has to say about this. I will free you from Caesar by introducing you to a deeper reality. You will know the freedom of my love.”

So every person on earth can claim this truth: The Son of God is a fellow human with me. Jesus is my brother in the flesh. So beautiful: “God our Father has us graced/And as a brother gently embraced/ Jesus all peoples on earth, Jesus, all peoples on earth.” Under Caesar’s nose, God has slipped into the world. As a brother Jesus has embraced all peoples on earth. By his love, by his might, Jesus draws closer to you than your next breath. He enters the world and he enters your heart. Right now, he slips past every dominating, controlling, distorting, fearful and skewed voice in your head. He speaks: “The truth of your life is that I embrace you. I love you. More than anyone has or ever could love you, I love you. My love will see you through.” This holy infant so tender and mild can keep you through the darkest hours, and preserved through the rages of the worst dominators.

But more. Jesus our brother can free us from seeking life and satisfaction in lesser ways. He can touch us with his presence in the deepest places. He says to us this night, “My love will satisfy you. Even the closest husband or wife cannot reach your heart with such *acceptance* as I give. Even the greatest job, with all its accolades and rewards cannot *satisfy* you like I do. Even knocking Caesar from his throne and taking his place will not *empower* your life like I do. But put me first, and I will *energize* all your work and relationships.”

The world is not the way the world screams it is. On this holy night, God’s mighty power has been poured out by entering the world, humbly, quietly, as the baby who is our brother, who embraces all peoples on earth. He comes to us quietly tonight and asks us to trust him. Amidst the tumult, in Christ all is calm and all is bright.

Over the last decade, we have a Christmas Eve tradition of praying together a *Pray of Freeing Faith* before communion. It is an invitation to come home to your heart and find Jesus already waiting there. It is an invitation to trust the paradox at the heart of Christian faith. Jesus asks us to surrender our wills and our hearts to him. But unlike the earthly Caesars and dominators, he does not seize control and then crush us. His rule does not diminish us. Actually, he gives us the freedom for which we have been longing. We release our hearts to his embrace and his forgiveness floods over us. Instead of stiffening against his arms, we press into him. We open our arms to his embrace of all people and become part of his great purpose of redeeming the world. We discover the love that no little Caesar can take from us. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Feel him reaching toward you this night. He slips past all defenses and arrives at the edge of your heart. Oh, welcome him! Enter the love that transforms every love. The one love that brings us home.

### **Prayer of Freeing Faith**

Lord Jesus, on this holy night, we are glad to come home to you. We have wandered far, down rugged paths of self-assertion. We sought fulfillment apart from you, and so we found only emptiness. We sought peace apart from you, and so we found only restlessness. We sought life apart from you, and so we found only death. Forgive us. We would return to our heart of hearts and find you there. We would return to you, knowing that you are as close as our own heartbeat. You are as near as our next breath. Only our stubborn sin keeps us from you. Oh, forgive us. We would draw near to you again in communion. We would come to the manger to see the Lord of life, to receive your body and blood, and so be joined to you again. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> English translation by Bettina Klein, commissioned by the Silent Night Museum, 1997, slightly altered.