

Many years ago, in one of the first congregations I served, one of the ladies in the church marched into my office and demanded to know, “Who is in charge here?”

Needless to say, I was a bit taken aback. Was she asking about the bishop? He was, in a sense the chief authority in the diocese, and, since it was a mission he had more authority than he had over most parishes. Was she asking about the vestry? They had authority over the material possessions of the church. Was she asking about me? I had authority over the liturgy and spiritual life of the church.

I must have taken too long to ponder the question, because she demanded again, this time a little louder, “Who is in charge here?”

When I asked her to explain a little more about what she was asking, the conversation became more productive.

When we read the account of the birth of Jesus in Luke, we might well have the same question. Who is in charge here? The account of the birth of Jesus begins with the statement, “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.”

The older translation may be more familiar; the one that says Augustus decreed that all the world should be taxed. Registration was a method of preparation for taxing the people. The person who has the power to tax is often regarded as the person in control. So, if you asked most people in the Roman Empire during the First Century, “Who is in control here?” they probably would have said, “Caesar is in control.” Some people would have been happy about this. Others would have been angry. Few people would have denied that Caesar was in control.

It was by the decree of Caesar that Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem when Jesus was born. Luke tells us that Joseph and Mary were residents of Nazareth, not Bethlehem. They traveled to Bethlehem to be registered with Joseph’s family, because Joseph was a descendant of King David.

More than seven hundred years earlier, the prophet Micah said, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

It may have appeared that Caesar was in control, but was he really controlling the unfolding history of the world? If not for the decree of the Emperor Augustus, Jesus would have been born in Nazareth. Micah, however, by the leading of the Holy Spirit had already said that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem.

If you are trying to figure out who is in control, where do you look? Do you look to Washington D.C.? Perhaps you look to Wall Street in New York City. Some people might say Columbus, or Crocker Park, if you thinking more locally. Is that where we think the world is being shaped? Is that where we think the important events of history are being determined?

In his Letter to the Galatians, St. Paul wrote, “When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son.”

It may not have looked like a good time for God to become incarnate. Israel was under the power of a pagan empire. Even within Judaism, the religious leaders could not get along very well. The Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Zealots, the Herodians, and other sects were all battling each other for control. Yet, this was the set time for God to take on human flesh. It was His time, and He came in His way. He entered the world, born into Jewish peasants, in a lowly setting.

The coming of the Son of God in human flesh went unnoticed by most. The puppet King Herod had no idea that the Messiah had come until sometime later, when the Maggi arrived and asked him about the birth of Jesus. The Emperor Augustus was probably never aware of the birth of Jesus. No one really important in the eyes of the world noticed the most important birth in all of history.

The birth of Jesus did not go entirely unnoticed. Of course Joseph and Mary welcomed the Son of God. Since Joseph was from Bethlehem, it is likely that his family was there to welcome Jesus. Then, there were the shepherds. They received a message from heaven that the messiah had been born. So, they went to see their king. They told everyone they encountered about the birth of Jesus. Their message went largely unnoticed by the powerful in this world. Shepherds had a social standing comparable to migrant workers in our society.

There were also angels from the realms of glory that took notice of the birth of Jesus. They knew that God was in control. They knew that this is how God usually works. The halls of power in Rome and Jerusalem could not contain the power of God. The angels knew that this event that looked so small was the greatest event in the history of the world. The Incarnate God who would deliver the world from sin and death had been born in Bethlehem.

Christmas might be a good time to ask ourselves whether we are looking in the right places for God’s action in this world. Some of you who visit hospice patients have seen God’s action in this world. In those precious last days and hours of a human life, you have seen God at work, transforming individuals and families. I’ve seen God at work at the nursing home when people smile with joy as we sing hymns with them. If you’ve been to the Metanoia Hospitality Center, you’ve seen God at work among the shelter resistant homeless. Some of the youth saw God at work in Cascade Park when they were picking up trash, and people marveled at the willingness of a church youth group to do that work. You may have seen God at work among your family or friends, when children started asking questions about God, or friends were touched with God’s healing power.

God is at work in this world. The New York Times and Washington Post may miss it. It’s not happening the way they think it should happen. Wall Street and Washington, D.C. may miss it, because it doesn’t fit with their ideas of real control.

The right answer to the person who demanded to know, “Who is in control here?” is that God is in control. If we know where to look, we will see it. The one who was welcomed by shepherds

and heralded by angels from the realms of glory is still working in this world. And, the way he works often goes unnoticed by the powerful of this world. He is in control. The child we remember tonight is the King of Creation. He often comes in humility, but never make the mistake of thinking that humility is powerless.