

Geography of Power: Rome
Second Sunday of Advent
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René Rodgers Jensen
First Christian Church
Omaha, Nebraska

In our Advent/Christmas sermon series, the Geography of Christmas, we are exploring geographical places from the Christmas story, and reflecting on how these places are windows into important theological and spiritual realities. Today we go to Rome. Unlike the other places from our series, Rome is not the site of any of the events of Jesus' birth. But Rome is nevertheless a brooding presence that shapes not only the events of Jesus' birth, but his life, his death—remember he dies on a Roman cross—and the growth of the early church.

As biblical scholars Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan (whose work in their book *The First Christmas* is fundamental to this sermon) point out, for nearly 2000 years Christians understood the stories of Jesus' birth solely *within the context of Christianity*. Our understanding of where and how and why Jesus was born was shaped, of course, by the stories of the New Testament, but also by Christian art, liturgy, and legend.

In the twentieth century, we realized that it was important to understand and interpret the Christmas stories as occurring *within Christianity within Judaism*. What were the political and religious dynamics for Jews in Palestine at the time of Jesus' birth, and how do they provide important context for those events.

Finally, scholars have taught us that to fully understand the Christmas stories we must see them as occurring *within Christianity within Judaism within the Roman Empire*. (*Borg and Crossan, The Birth of Jesus p. 57*) Politically, culturally, and economically, in the time of Jesus everything began and ended with Rome.

So Luke tells us that it is the actions of Caesar in faraway Rome that sets the events of Jesus' birth in motion. (p. 58 in NT)

1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

When Jesus was born, Rome had been a military power for nearly 500 years. It began as a republic, a strategy for avoiding royal tyranny. But it eventually learned a hard lesson—you could have a republic or an empire, but not both at the same time for long. Fifty years before Jesus' birth, a series of civil wars raged. Julius Caesar against Pompey. Then Caesar's supporters against Caesar's assassins. Then Octavian, Caesar's adopted son, against Mark Antony. As the civil wars dragged on, it began to look as if the Roman Empire would destroy itself and take most of the Mediterranean world with it.

Then, almost miraculously (as it seemed to many), Octavian defeated Mark Antony and declared himself the Emperor Augustus. The civil wars were over and Rome emerged from them as an imperial monarchy.

Emperor Augustus ruled with absolute power the most powerful empire the world has ever known. At that time, it stretched from what is now the English Channel to Northern Africa, from Spain to the area we call the Middle East.

At the time of the first Christmas, whether they venerated Rome or hated it, everyone would have been in agreement that it was the only kingdom in the world that mattered. But the story of Jesus is the story of two kingdoms. On the one hand is the mighty kingdom known as the Roman Empire—vast, wealthy, and incredibly powerful. On the other hand is the Kingdom of God, whose unlikely messenger is a tiny baby born

in Bethlehem. “The tectonic clash of the kingdom of Rome versus the kingdom of God...is the context for the Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke.” (*Borg and Crossan, p. 59*)

First, the kingdom known as the Roman Empire. Rome dominated through four interlocking strands of power. The first was *military power*; the highly trained Roman legions not only conquered country after country, they build the infrastructures on which their control depended—sea ports, roads, and bridges. The second strand was *economic power*; once an area was conquered, it could be used for trade and commerce and the accumulation of Rome’s vast wealth. The third strand was *political power*. Rome was highly effective at co-opting the local aristocracy into its power structures. So in Judea we have King Herod ruling, but under Roman authority.

The fourth strand was *ideological power*. The glue that held the vast Roman Empire together was the worship of the emperor as divine. Prior to Augustus, individual Romans could be raised to the status of god for some extraordinary service. Julius Caesar, Caesar Augustus’ adopted father, had been deified after his assassination. Until Augustus, deification always happened after someone died.

But Augustus, whose name means “sacred”, was named a god during his lifetime. And listen to the names given to him. He was called Son of God, God from God, Lord, Redeemer, Liberator, and Savior of the World. Those names should sound familiar to us—they are almost identical to the names given to Jesus Christ, the one who would usher in the Kingdom of God.

If we had been there for that first Christmas, we would have found the idea that this peasant baby would present any sort of challenge to Caesar Augustus and the Roman Empire beyond laughable.

Yet in the vulnerability of this child, God shows a very different kind of power from that of Rome—the power of love, the power of gentleness, the power of vulnerability. Contrast the military might of Rome with the vision of God’s kingdom we read of in the prophet Micah,

“They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid.”

The goal of both the Kingdom of Rome and the Kingdom of God is peace. For Rome, peace comes through victory, through conquest, through violence. For the Kingdom of God, peace comes through justice—where everyone has their own fig tree—their own land, their own means of making a living, and no one is afraid.

Now we know who the good guy is here. We know we are supposed to root for the Kingdom of God and turn our backs on the Kingdom of Rome. But the truth is, Rome has a lot to offer. It does bring about peace—peace at the point of a sword, but enough of a peace that roads are built, cities grow, and trade flourishes. Rome offers many of the things we value—security, few overt conflicts, and material prosperity. True, these things come through violence and domination, by elevating the few over the many, but Rome does a very good job of providing security and prosperity, at least for the powerful elite.

And while the terrible truth is that peace through violence and conquest never lasts, the Kingdom of Rome—or the kingdom of whatever current world power would

rule through force—has offered a highly successful path to at least temporary peace throughout human history.

The Kingdom of God also offers peace, but by a very different path. It offers peace through justice, through a sharing of resources, through community and mutual support. It envisions a peace so complete that the lion shall lie down with the lamb, and a tiny child can safely play with poisonous snakes. In the Kingdom of God the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, and the stranger is welcomed.

The Roman vision of power is incarnated in the mighty emperor Caesar Augustus. The Christian vision of power is incarnated in a tiny baby in a manger.

In the Kingdom of Rome, power is used to coerce. In the Kingdom of God, love is the only genuine form of power, love which never coerces, but which persuades, lures, entices.

The Roman understanding of power is power through military might, through being the biggest, the strongest, the most ruthless. In the Kingdom of God, power is expressed in vulnerability, the vulnerability of a baby in a manger, or a man on a cross.

In this Advent season, the question we must ask ourselves in which kingdom do we trust? Do we worship at the altar of Caesar, who promises wealth and security and peace—but through violence and conquest? Or do we worship God, who offers peace through justice for everyone, even the least among us. Do we trust in the power of empire, the power of vast armies and military might? Or do we trust in the power of love, shown to us in a tiny baby—and in the vulnerability of a man dying on a Roman cross?

In which kingdom will we make our home?