

A Change in Administration

December 2006

As I write this, and as you read this, we are preparing for a major shift in leadership. The old leadership is on the way out. A new administration is waiting to step in and start running things. There is joy among some at the coming change. There is distress among others, especially those who are losing power. We are waiting with hope and trepidation.

I'm not talking about coming turnover in Congress. I'm talking about the coming Kingdom of God. This is Advent after all, and this is a church newsletter, not the newspaper. But I'm still talking politics.

Think politics has nothing to do with Christmas? Then you need to read the gospel of Luke with first century eyes. When Luke tells his story, he is not trying to paint a hallmark scene. Luke tells the story of Christ's birth in a way that was designed for full political impact. His original readers couldn't miss it – it's just us, all these years later, who don't understand all the references in this "campaign ad."

Luke makes sure to tell us that this took place in the days of Caesar Augustus – so that we know who it is that Jesus is coming to overturn. Then he tells us that Jesus is the Son of God – a title claimed by Augustus, who, along with a number of other emperors, also claimed to be a god himself. When the angels come to sing, they tell the shepherds that the baby they will find is "The Lord." This was tantamount to treason in an era where the standard salute was "Caesar is Lord." And finally, the song the angels sing is modeled closely after the odes of praise that were composed to announce the birth of the heir to the Roman crown. First century ears would have recognized all this. And they would either have flinched at the disrespect shown to their "true" ruler, the Emperor (if they were on the side of Rome), or (if they were early Christians) they would have cheered the way a baby born to a displaced family in a horse stall was declared the winner of the race, before the polls even closed. All that was still needed was the inauguration.

We are still waiting for the inauguration. We know who the winner is. But even long after the fall of Rome, we are still stuck with a lame duck administration – not any American political party, but the powers-that-be of this world, whose policies and priorities will eventually be replaced by God's. This is the double-vision of Advent: we are not only celebrating and rehashing the wait for the coming of Christ as a baby in Bethlehem; we are also celebrating and rehearsing for the coming of Christ's Kingdom, God's will done on earth as it is in heaven.

With that in mind, the abrupt shift from political campaign ads to sentimental Christmas ads on TV is not such a whiplash change after all – because the coming of Christ is about the biggest upset victory in history. All that is needed now is the inauguration.