

It's good to be back, to be recovered from bronchitis, the worst part of which was not getting to see my granddaughter, Madeline, whom I was barred from being with because of my leprous condition. Spencer, who used to drink straight from the milk carton, claiming it built up our immune systems, has a child and is suddenly paranoid about germs. So I was banished for a while.

Madeline is vocalizing a lot these days, getting ready to break into speech. She said the word "Philip" yesterday, clear as a bell, though no one else will admit it. I never realized the depths of jealousy in my own family.

I was talking with my mother about Madeline speaking.

I said, "I can't wait to hear her voice, to hear how she sounds, to hear her say words."

My mom said, "You always did have a fondness for words."

My mom remembers things like that. Details about her children.

I have always liked words. I remember when I was a child and given a Bible for my first communion at St. Mary's, how some of the words and sentences were so powerful, so mysterious, so poignant, I read them over and over. I remember one of the sentences. It was from the birth story of Luke, which the nun had us read. There were about 20 kids in my first communion class, and conveniently, 20 verses in the Lukan Christmas story. I volunteered

to read the first verse, to get it over with. Luke 2:1 “And it came to pass, that in those days there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that the whole world should be enrolled.”

I knew what a decree was. A ruling, a verdict, an order!

One did not have a school teacher mother without knowing about decrees.

I was less sure what it meant to be enrolled, but it sounded as if it involved a great deal of work and inconvenience and even difficulty and pain because this one man, Caesar Augustus, wanted to know the extent of his holdings, so demanded everyone return to their ancestral town. Yet one more example, in the long line of history, of self-absorbed people, drunk on power, made thoughtless by privilege or anger, with no regard for the consequences of their actions.

Not that that happens today.

But I digress. Then again, this is a story of digression. Of a young family, penniless and powerless, starting a life together, then forced to digress, forced to depart from their lives and dreams to be enrolled, so one more ruler with an ego can know the extent of his kingdom, can tote up his treasure, can number his subjects. So this peasant family, and thousands like them, were ordered to leave the warmth and safety of home and hit the road. A woman on the verge of giving birth forced to walk 75 miles. The old, the lame, the weak,

leave! Leave your jobs, leave your home. There's an awful lot of ugliness in that one little sentence. "And it came to pass, that in those days there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that the whole world should be enrolled."

We're used to hearing that sentence in the sepia, nostalgic tones of Christmas plays, but when we shine the bright light of reality on it, there's villainy to that sentence. The wickedness of unbridled power demanding unquestioned obedience. And demanding it from the whole world. How's that for arrogance? Caesar Augustus ruled the coastal region of the Mediterranean and thought he was in charge of the world. "The whole world should be enrolled."

Such arrogance and evil. Lot of that going around these days. It's nothing new, though I must say arrogance and evil are doing a much better job at publicity. Things we never would have known about, we now watch unfold in real time. That is new.

What is as old as Caesar Augustus is the twisted belief, common to tyrants in every land, in every religion, in every race, that they alone have the right to decree, demand, and destroy. For a number of reasons, because of apathy, of fear, of confusion, of hopelessness, of exasperation and ignorance, we humans have been unable to solve this problem. I have no doubt we will. Perhaps not tomorrow, but eventually.

But don't think tyranny is new. Its efficiency is new, but this disease of decrees, this cancer of arrogance, are as old as Caesar.

Jesus was born into this same kind of world. We remember him; we honor him, because his response to evil is so far the best we have found—to love, to give, to share, to heal. And to love, give, share, and heal specifically, not generally. To love specifically, to heal specifically. Let me tell you a bit more what I mean, when I talk about loving specifically. The English poet William Blake said, “The general good is the plea of the scoundrel, the hypocrite, the flatterer.”

We don't remember Jesus because he gave wonderful sermons urging us to embrace some innocuous general good, some theory of good. We remember him because when he was in our shoes, even as he was set upon by the powers and principalities, he found a way to love specifically—to specifically love a leper, an outcast, a traitor, a woman at a well, a soldier, a Samaritan.

If we are going to have any hope in this world, if we are going to have any happiness or joy in the world, we had better learn that the only answer for humanity, the only hope for humanity, is to love specifically. I have no doubt those two misguided persons in San Bernardino believed they were acting for the general good, that the man killing people at Planned Parenthood, believed they were ridding the world of some evil they alone could sense and see. Just

as Caesar believed he was acting for the general good. Just as Donald Trump and those who urge him on believe they are acting in our nation's general good. But the general good is the plea of the scoundrel, the hypocrite, the flatterer.

This is why Jesus loved specifically, and why he called us to do the same. To worry less about some vague theory of general good, and to roll up our sleeves and work at a specific good.

I received a phone call Friday night from a man who told me his mother, Harriet, was dying. Would I speak at her funeral when she died? Yes, of course. Harriet was active at Irvington Friends Meeting when I was their pastor. It was full of young people who enjoyed nothing more than a robust philosophical discussion about how to save the world. Meanwhile, Harriet was saving the world every morning by driving a school bus for developmentally disabled children. No driver before her had lasted a year on that bus route. Harriet lasted 30.

Harriet was the head of the meeting. She wasn't the clerk. She wasn't the pastor. But we never did anything without checking with Harriet first. This gentle woman, a decree never crossed her lips, filled her life with specific acts of goodness and love.

It's funny when you think about it.

When Caesar wants something to happen, he sends out decrees.

When God wants something to happen, God sends out a Jesus. Or a Harriet. Or an Elsie. Or maybe even you.