

Let Every Heart Prepare Him Room, Luke 2:1-7, 12/20/09

Luke 2:1-7

¹ In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be **registered**.

² This was the first **registration** when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be **registered**, each to his own town. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be **registered** with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (ESV)

It may not seem this way – these verses are so well known; you see them in warm and fuzzy Christmas cards – but these words were quite subversive in the first century. They still are.

The facts that Luke records are a direct confrontation and a rejection of a prevalent view of Christianity.

From the very beginning to this very day, the cultures of the world have said that Christianity is – that the Christian's faith is – a private, subjective and internal religious sentiment. This perspective on Christianity is that if it *is* just a private, subjective and internal religious sentiment or experience, then it is just as valid – or as irrelevant – as any other religion, or anyone else's private, subjective and internal sentiments.

Luke takes this perspective head on. You won't see these words on most Christmas cards which *will* have v. 7 – that Mary "wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." But Luke wants you to take note of these earlier words because the Christian message, the Christian worldview and the Christian gospel, are rooted in history. The good news is actually "news" – something that could have been reported in a 1st century newspaper.

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In other words, this happened in a real place, at a real time – when Quirinius was governor – when real events were taking place. Notice how the word "registered" or "registration" appears four times in the first five verses. He's inviting you to investigate these historical people – Caesar Augustus and Quirinius – and these events. like the fact that this census was taken.

The fact of Christmas – the fact that the birth of God, happening in a little town, during the reign of a *specific* king, tells us four things about this God. It tells us about:

- God's Providence
- God's Promises
- God's Paradox
- God's Passion

Let's look first at his providence.

When do kings typically show up? As Shakespeare might say, it's either at the very best of times, or at the worst of times, right? Either at the best of times to take credit for and bask in the success of his kingdom, or at the worst of times to rescue or defend his nation.

But what is the timing of this arrival, of this king, to this kingdom?

One thousand years before Jesus was born, Israel was the greatest nation in the Mediterranean part of the world. David was reigning, and he would be followed by his son, Solomon. There was peace with all of their old enemies. Emissaries visited from Africa and elsewhere. Many came to Jerusalem to seek the king's wisdom. That would have been a great time for the king to come. Everyone was waiting for the deliverer king to take Israel to that next step of domination.

But one thousand years later, and everything is different. Ligon Duncan has pointed out that, "Not only has Israel suffered the division of the northern and southern kingdom... not only have the Assyrians taken over the northern kingdom... not only has exile occurred for those living in the southern kingdom... but *there is no kingdom left at all*. Israel is a petty client state of a Roman oppressor. There IS no Israelite king, because basically there is no Israelite nation, because the one reigning over them is a pagan!" These people – people like Caesar Augustus and Quirinius – are immoral polytheists! The people ruling over Israel don't even understand that there is only one true God!

And *this* is when the king shows up? The king shows up when there is no more kingdom left to save?

It makes no sense. And it won't. Because this is a different sort of salvation that won't make sense for about 33 years. But Luke, recounting these events and recording history – showing us that these events happened IN history – points out how God is providentially moving over all of these events.

Look at Caesar Augustus for a moment. This man is understood by his own people to be a divine agent who leads the awesome Roman empire. Luke wants you to see that he is actually God's pawn. Notice that Luke says that Augustus can decree that "the whole world" get registered. This is the great nephew of Julius Caesar, and the one who beat back Antony and Cleopatra. This Caesar was given the name Augustus, which means "the illustrious one" or the "holy one." One inscription to him calls Augustus the "savior of the whole world." In other words, Caesar Augustus had authority over humanity—and in fact in the people's eyes, even nature.

It's this Illustrious One – this god on earth, Luke wants you to know – who is a pawn in the providence of God. Luke, in the most subtle way, is letting you know that God is sovereign, and he will use the most powerful leader of the most powerful empire on earth to do his bidding.

Friends, this means that you may feel small. You may feel like your faith, your ideals, your values, your worldview is getting increasingly small. You may feel like a pawn in the hands of a culture or system or a company or a boss that overwhelms your personal sensibilities. But we've got to remember this: God reigns. And the most powerful man on earth is in his control.

Have no fear. God reigns! Luke also means for us to realize that salvation history is both particular at this point(it's Jewish) and it's universal in its implications (the Roman world). He's got the *whole world* in his hands, you see.

But it's not just God's sovereignty over potentates and his providence over time, but to fulfill his promises, things will happen in the *place* he wants it to happen.

There is a famous place in the book of Micah – we read it last week – that says, "...you, O Bethlehem, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, *from you* shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel..."

But Joseph and Mary are in Galilee. How is God going to get them to where they need to be to fulfill his own providential purposes?

A registration is happening, right? Why?

Well, probably to set up the next taxation period. And what does this registration cause? It causes a man named Joseph who is betrothed to a virgin named Mary to go from Nazareth, a small town, to another small town, called Bethlehem. Why?

This fellow Quirinius, who is a Roman underling – a governor in Syria – puts the registration into enforcement, and this puts into motion something that only a good Jew like Joseph would do. You see, after the conquest of Canaan, many years before, the Israelite people became a diaspora. They were spread all over the Middle East. And because of that, your original place of residence was all important.

Remember, God had given through Moses and Abraham, specific duties to the tribes of Israel. Just because the tribes of Israel had been dispersed all over creation didn't mean they still didn't have those responsibilities, right?

Every Jew hoped that they would get to resettle in the place they came from – it's why creating the state of Israel was still important to Jews in the 1940's! If it was that important in the 20th century, you can imagine how important it was for them in the 1st century!

For instance, if Israel were ever to have a king again, that person would have to prove that their lineage was linked to David. At the return from Babylon, a person who claimed priestly prerogatives was required to prove priestly descent. So when a call comes out for registration – they didn't have a mail service or proxy forms like we have – every good Jew gets on their donkey, and goes back to their hometown. If they wanted to register, and say "this is where I'm from," they actually had to go back home. So Joseph and Mary take the 90 mile trip – it probably took 5-days by donkey. And think about this – Mary is in her 9th month.

Sonja Chen just gave birth. (*I'm sure Sonja is thinking, boy I missed out! I would love to have taken a 5 day trip on donkey-back!*)

Now you might say, "Lord why do you have me ... where you have me? I don't know why you have me in Central New Jersey, or at this school, or with these people that call me a member of their family... Why here? This isn't where I want to be.

I can't tell you exactly why you are here. All I can tell you is that if God wants you somewhere else, he will have no problem getting you there. God can get you where you need to be. If he can move Joseph and pregnant Mary to fulfill prophecy and his purposes, and use the most powerful potentate of the most powerful Empire on Earth to do it, he can certainly move you! He got Jesus where he needed to be. God is sovereign in all our ways and in all our times and in all our places. You can trust him.

The promise of God to those who have given their life to him is that all who come to him will never be cast out – in fact that promise goes further. He says, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." If he is always going to abide with you and never leave you, then he knows exactly where you are and where you need to be, even if you don't!

There is that great old hymn:

My times are in Thy hand;
My God, I wish them there;
My life, my friends, my soul I leave
Entirely to Thy care.

So we have his providence and his promises. What about his paradox?

The paradox of God is the paradox of his heart and his actions. The paradox of God's arrival in his son, reveals the particulars of his heart.

Verse 7: "she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

This is, if you stop to really meditate on it, something that is so risk-taking, and so loving, all at the same time.

You have to think back. From the moment this creator God made humanity, he placed them in the best possible place to live – in a place that had everything they needed. They had water, they had fresh food, it was temperate – they could walk around naked and unashamed, for Pete's sake! He gave them one for the other.

But humanity's response from here on out was, "This is not good enough. You never give us what WE really want. We don't want what you give – we want to BE you."

Humanity returned to God the deepest sort of rejection, because humanity has said to God, "If we can have all you have, then we won't need you." So we rebelled against him. We preferred the things he created over and above him. We have preferred to worship ourselves and our own dreams and ambitions, than his for us. It's a *complete* rejection.

It was almost two hundred years ago that Thomas Jefferson commissioned Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to find the source of the Missouri River, and from there to discover a relatively easy water route west to the Pacific. After months of journeying, they found out that such a waterway, doesn't exist.

But they did succeed in mapping the Northwest. And fifteen months after pushing themselves upstream, they found the headwaters of the mighty Missouri River near the Montana-Idaho border. It was a tiny little rivulet, which a member of the expedition, Private Hugh McNeal, straddled, thanking God that he had lived to put one foot on either side of the heretofore mighty and endless Missouri River.¹

It's amazing that when God comes to rescue us, the very people who have rejected him over and over again, he comes by bringing the fullness of who he is *not* with his glorious, frightening and mighty heavenly hosts, but by giving us his son in humility. Not in a palace of silver and gold, but in a feeding trough of unclean animals. Not clothed in silken baby garments that would be fit for an infant king, but in strips of cloth like any peasant would use. It's a paradox – a contradiction of everything we would expect. But so important.

Some of you here are avoiding coming to God at all costs, and are therefore rejecting, God.

Think of someone – really think now – of someone you have let down. Someone you know you have disappointed. Just open up that guilt for a split-second. You know how you will go to great lengths to avoid them. You'll do what is humanly possible to never run into them, and the very thought of that person makes you cringe.

Some of you have that same feeling about the creator of all things.

Now you don't think about this too much because you don't fear running into God at the supermarket while you're buying milk and fruit or whatever. Except that you do. He *made* the milk and the fruit.

Really, consider the sweet gentleness of this almighty and powerful God, that he would become so small that here in this little, dirty feeding trough, you could straddle his bed like you could a small stream.

Don't avoid him any longer – he makes himself small so that you will rush to him to be reconciled in his son. Because whatever it takes, he does. Whatever it costs, he pays. Wherever he has to go, he goes. Whatever he has to bear to make that happen, he will bear.

Jesus Christ, from the very moment of his birth, begins to personally experience the humiliation that we experience because of our sin, but which he does not deserve because of his sin because he has no sin. He accepts this experience of humiliation because he is living for us in our place.

So every calamity his people experienced because of sin, he experienced. Every disappointment his people experienced because of sin, he experienced. Every rejection his people experienced because of sin, he accepts. He accepts all of our deserved consequences for sin, and every

¹ Illustration from Marshall Shelley, "Broader Pastures, More Breeds," *Leadership* (Fall 2000)

humiliation for sin, all of his life. Willingly. **Because he loves you.** It is a paradox. We would not be able to even speak of right or wrong, or good or evil, or of truth or of beauty... if there was no judge, no ruler over all. And yet this glorious judge comes not to judge but to BE judged for the sin you and I have committed. He is a glorious paradox and he offers himself to you right now!

And if you say, "Well that's humiliating – to admit that I am a sinner, and weak, and in need of a baby born 2,000 years ago..." ...well, he doesn't ask you to do anything that he has not already done *for* you. Look at *his* humility! The Lord will never ask you to do something that he himself has not already done.

Now friends, you need to know that paradox of the gospel when you live a life in Christ.

Look at Mary. She has received a visitation from a messenger of God – from an angel – who has told her, "You are highly favored." Then she gets on the back of a donkey, when her own back must have been about to give out from being 9 months pregnant, and travels 5 days and ninety miles only to be told there is no room left at this inn, and that she will have to have this baby in a stable.

What's with that? "You are blessed among women"... but "sorry ma'am, we had to give your room away to someone else." That's an *unpleasant* paradox!

Who would imagine that the one about whom was prophesied that, "his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace...", that he would be born this way – in a place where an unclean pig would put his mouth.

Now friends, if this is the path of Jesus, this means we will know this paradox too – that God will never leave you or forsake you, and yet you might struggle with loneliness. The Lord says "I love you." But a doctor still says, "It's cancer." God says, "I will never leave you," but some of you have heard, "I have found someone else." Your heavenly Father says, "I will never forsake you," but your child says, "I hate you, and I never want to see you again."

The great saints of the Old Testament and the saints of the church – remember the martyrs – they have always struggled to keep God's love, and present circumstances, together when they don't seem to fit.

Right now, some of you think that your present circumstances negate the promises of God. And you wish that you could cry out for an angel to come and explain to you why it is that you are where you are. But Mary DID have an angel. Gabriel DID come to her. He HAD told them where to go and when, and this stable was that place. God is showing you here that the present circumstances you're in – just like Mary and Joseph – do not contradict his purposes. In fact he goes INTO those circumstances WITH you.

Listen – the next time you hear a Christian give a testimony about how they came to know Jesus Christ, what will you hear? What you'll hear is that in some of the worst circumstances that you can imagine, Jesus came to them. That God visited them in one of the worst situations in their life, and rescued them.

Some of you are holding onto something that has been – for you – an unchangeable fact. That a certain circumstance ruined your life... and it's been ruined ever since. I know that if you were to let go of that "fact," it would almost make a mockery of your life because so many decisions you've made have been based on that singular fact – "this particular situation ruined my life." But let me gently re-cast that truth: no situation can ruin your life – only the way you *respond* to circumstances can ruin your life.

How can I claim that? This event – the incarnation – tells us that there is no circumstance where God's power cannot be on display. No circumstance can outstrip the loving promises of God to never leave or forsake you.

And this takes us to our last point. God's Passion.

There is of course, one situation that proves this best of all. And I think Luke is pointing to it right here.

Tradition has it – you have to read the early church fathers for this – that Jesus was born in a cave. And it's probably true. These inns or guest houses were often placed near caves. You could imagine how that would be useful for food storage or for all kinds of things. In fact, The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is built over a cave. If you go into that church building, you go down a series of steps into this cave area where tradition has it, Jesus was born. Constantine, in the 4th century, had this church built over that spot to commemorate the birth of Jesus.

So here are the circumstances. This child that Mary is going to have, is to be born in a stable or a cave, surrounded by the profane – he's to be laid in this feeding trough – wrapped in torn cloth. Rags, really. This is the king's first throne room.

But the humiliation of this situation points to the humility of an even greater set of circumstances. In Luke 23, we read this: "Now there was a man named Joseph, from the Jewish town of Arimathea. He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man, who had not consented to their decision and action; and he was looking for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down and **wrapped it in a linen shroud** and **laid him in a tomb** cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid."²

Here is Luke telling us that just after the death of Jesus, another good and righteous Joseph was with Jesus. And this Joseph took the body of the 33 year old Jesus and again he was wrapped in cloth and laid in a cave.

You see friends – Luke is cluing us in early on to the fact that this child is born not just into humble circumstances, but for a *tragic destiny*. This infant is born to die. But it is his passion – his death on the cross for us – that proves that there are no circumstances in your life where God's love and promises and providence and glory **cannot be on display in all its splendor**. His power is *always* displayed in our weakness. What seem like accidental events of history have become God's acts of destiny and mercy. His is an upside-down kingdom. Jesus Christ is born unique among men –

² Luke 23:50-55

He is sinless. He is God's first-born and only begotten son. And yet he becomes the last. The one born among the beast becomes our beast of burden, so that we sinners will be exalted to the heavens in the resurrection.

This Christmas, all your circumstances can be turned upside down. Because it's not your circumstances that have ruined your life, but how you reacted to them. God wants you to turn to him in *all* your circumstances. He wants your heart. Let your heart prepare him room. This baby was born to die, because he was born to die for you.

Let's Pray.