

The Birth of the Son
Luke 2:1-7
Christmas Eve, 2020
Rev. Dave Dorst
CenterPoint Church

Luke 2:1-7

¹In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴And 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, ⁵to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷And 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 God’s holy, inspired, inerrant word for us tonight.”)

One of the not-so-fun parts of moving is getting all of your official documents moved over to the new state; particularly your driver’s licenses and car registrations. It took me 6 trips to the DMV to get all four of our cars and drivers licenses done. 6 trips to the DMV, and a lot of money for each car for a “tax-free” state. Welcome to Delaware, now fork it over! The first three verses of this passage mention registration 3 times, not cars but people. Joseph and Mary were compliant with this government edict, this call to be counted for the census, to go back to Joseph’s hometown.

In the first four verses here, we read of Augustus, Quirinius, Syria, Galilee, Nazareth, Judea, Bethlehem – why do we need all of these details, why not get right to the story, Luke? We need the historical account of our Savior’s birth and life to be grounded in the historical facts of the time when it happened. This is to distinguish Jesus’ birth from the fables and legends, and anything that starts vaguely with “once upon a time” or “a long time ago.” Jesus was a historical person, not a fictional creation, and everything that follows in the Gospel is both history and His Story.

Caesar Augustus ruled over Rome from around 27 BC to AD 14, a relatively long, 40 year period. His real name was Gaius Octavius, his uncle was Julius Caesar, he had to defeat Marc Antony to be the head ruler of Rome. Augustus was not a last name, it was a title given to him by the Roman Senate that means “holy” or “revered.” It was an attempt to make him a god. Imagine that: a man trying to become a god at the time when God was becoming a man!¹ Caesar ruled over what is commonly called the “Pax Romana” – the Peace of Rome. He did a good job restoring law and order in the Empire and making it safer than it had been, but this wasn’t peace because Caesar had made friends with everyone. It was peace because Rome had beaten everyone into submission. But peace never lasts on earth unless it’s rooted in the true peace that would be born in the midst of this Roman Peace. Galatians 4:4 would describe this time that God decided to send Jesus into the world as “the fullness of time”: “*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.*” Jesus came at the perfect time, exactly when God had ordained and decided that His plans would best be accomplished.

Who sent Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem? Caesar Augustus wanted a census count and told everyone to go to their hometown, so it was the government that sent them, right? Well, yes, in one

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke, Volume 1* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), p. 83, 85.

sense. But in another sense, the hand of God moved Joseph and Mary to the town where Jesus was to be born, to fulfill the prophecy of Micah 5:2: *“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, 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, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.”* It’s a little ironic that Caesar wanted this census so that he could get better control of his empire, and yet, in doing that, he helped God’s plan come along to bring the true King into the world.²

The route from Nazareth to Bethlehem is around an 80-mile journey! I don’t know if you’ve considered walking to Ocean City, MD from here in Smyrna, but that’s the kind of journey we’re talking about. I remember Kath being very pregnant and her midwife suggesting that a lot of walking would bring on labor. But we can’t imagine a woman who’s nine months pregnant walking that far, so even though there is no mention of a donkey in the Scriptures, there is usually one provided in our stories and artwork.

Have you ever travelled without making advanced plans for lodging? I remember my father-in-law telling me how he vacationed in Scotland and didn’t make any reservations ahead of time. That would stress me out! But it worked out for him. I’m not sure what Joseph was thinking, probably something along the lines of “we have to get there to be registered, I’m sure we’ll find somewhere to stay.” I’m not sure it was possible to book rooms ahead of time before phones and websites unless you sent someone. But the city was all out of rooms, so they had to stay where the animals were kept. Usually you hear it called a stable, but it was more likely a cave. Then they had to use a manger to lay the baby in, which sounds so lovely when we sing about it in “Away in a Manger,” but is actually kind of disgusting – it’s an animal’s feeding trough! *“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head”* - Luke 9:58, a reminder that not only was Jesus born into a place where no child should be born, but He lived His life during His later ministry without much of a home.

This is probably a great reminder, too, that when you are in a difficult time or a dark place in life, that God can work there just as well as He can in the great times and the happy places. We’ve already talked about how poor and lowly the couple were, maybe they didn’t think it could get any lower, but it did. I’m sure Mary would have chosen a much better place to have her baby, and maybe she had some passing thoughts that if she was going to be giving birth to the “Son of the Most High” then God would give her a really nice place to do that. They were in the city of David, the great King of Israel’s past, but they certainly weren’t in any palace. God accomplished His plans in the most humble of places. That should give us some perspective the next time we find ourselves in a difficult season, struggling, feeling like we should be doing better. Look for God’s blessings in those times. You don’t have to be in perfect health, with the perfect job, and everything going great in your life for God to be working. In fact, it’s usually in the trials and the pain that God works.

Martin Luther mocked people who thought that “Mary was praying and rejoicing, without any pain”³ when she bore Jesus. Ladies, think of your first birth and the fear and pain involved. Then take yourself out of the hospital and imagine it happening in a barn or a cave with disgusting smells all around, zero medical attention, and just your clueless husband to help you. Andrew Peterson has a song called “Labor of Love” that says, “And the stable was not clean and the cobblestones were cold, and little Mary full of grace, with the tears upon her face, had no mother’s hand to hold. It was a labor of pain, it was a cold sky above, but for the girl on the ground in the dark with every beat of

² Idea taken from Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke, Volume I* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009), p 67.

³ Martin Luther, *Sermons for Advent and Christmas Day* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2017).

her beautiful heart, it was a labor of love.” A labor of pain and a labor of love. Which is also somewhat a description of Jesus’ life: pain endured for love’s sake.

Let’s turn to two Scriptures to see what I mean by that:

-Philippians 2:6-7 – “...*though He (Jesus) was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.*” Jesus had reigned for all of eternity past as God in heaven. He left the majesty and glory that He had always known to step into our world that was wrecked with sin and misery. He made Himself nothing in comparison to what His former state had been, though, of course, He retained His full deity. It was a veiled deity, His role went from ruler of the universe to a servant of God and His people.

-2 Corinthians 8:9 – “*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich.*” This isn’t talking about money, it’s talking about spiritual form and status. This passage picks up that same idea, that Jesus left His position of Almighty King of the Universe to become a lowly servant. But He didn’t just do it to find out what it felt like to be human. He did it to accomplish something, to make it possible for human beings who are poor in spirit to be spiritually rich and given the riches of His heavenly kingdom. It’s related to the idea of Jesus becoming sin on our behalf (2 Cor. 5:21) and becoming a curse for us (Galatians 3:13) when He hung on the cross in our place. A labor of pain and a labor of love.

Tim Keller reminds us that Jesus’ incarnation proves that God is both holy and loving, not one or the other: “A God who was *only* holy would not have come down to us in Jesus Christ. He would have simply demanded that we pull ourselves together, that we be moral and holy enough to merit a relationship with him. A deity that was an ‘all-accepting God of love’ would not have needed to come to earth either. This God of the modern imagination would have just overlooked sin and evil and embraced us. Neither the God of moralism nor the God of relativism would have bothered with Christmas. The Biblical God, however, is infinitely holy, so our sin could not be shrugged off. It had to be dealt with... He knows we could never climb up to him, so... He comes himself to fetch us.”⁴

Conclusion: Mary’s Firstborn Would be the Firstborn from the Dead Too

A news article from two weeks ago caught my eye. Apparently, there is a Homeowners Association in Raleigh, NC that has asked one of its residents to take down the cross in their front yard in early December because “the symbol shared no connection with Christmas.” The couple, the Faisons, were given a \$100 fine for not complying, but they have appealed the fine. Apparently, the HOA was not coming from a position of total ignorance, though, as their statement said this: “The cross represents the death of Jesus Christ who died for our sins so we can have eternal life. The Christmas season is associated with the birth of the Savior... nativity scenes would be appropriate representation of the season.”⁵

Well, yes, nativity scenes are appropriate, but are crosses completely inappropriate when we think of the Christmas story? When we look at the manger, we should see a shadow of the cross. The cross is what Jesus’ life was pointing to, the purpose and destination to which His incarnation would eventually take Him. Philippians 2:8 – “*And being found in human form, He (Jesus) humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*” The tiny hands that Mary held

⁴ Tim Keller, *Hidden Christmas* (New York: Viking, 2016), p. 47.

⁵ Peter Aitken’s article “North Carolina HOA demands family remove cross from yard, explain connection with Christmas,” Decemebr 11, 2020, foxnews.com.

would someday have nails driven through them to hold Jesus on that cross. The head that Joseph kissed over and over would have a crown of thorns cruelly wedged in place on it. The child who had to be born outside because there was no room in the inn would be taken outside of the city to be crucified on the hill called Golgotha. The body that was wrapped in swaddling cloth would eventually have a burial shroud over it.

But even beyond the cross, we can see the empty tomb in the shadow of the manger as well. We don't just see pain and death, we see redemption, victory, and hope. Verse seven called Jesus Mary's firstborn son, but the Scriptures also say that Jesus is the firstborn from the dead. Colossians 1:18 says that Jesus is "*the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything He might be preeminent.*" What does that mean to be the firstborn from the dead? His rising from the grave was the first resurrection that would enable all of God's people to experience resurrection from the dead as well. Those who believe in Jesus He will raise up on the last day.

Thomas Watson sums up that:

"Jesus was poor, that He might make us rich.

Jesus was born of a virgin that we might be born of God.

Jesus took on flesh, that He might give us His Spirit.

Jesus lay in the manger, that we may have life in paradise.

Jesus came down from heaven, that He might bring us to heaven."⁶

This is the true message of Christmas, not lights and gifts and singing and eggnog, but God becoming flesh to redeem and rescue His people. If this is the first time you're hearing this or the first time that the message of Jesus has made sense to you or you have questions about it, please come talk to me, get in touch with me, I'd love to talk more with you about it. Let's close in prayer.

Benediction

1 John 5:20-21

"And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life."

⁶ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1957), p. 196.