

“Born This Day in the City of David”

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What does Christmas mean to you? What is it all about?

Perhaps the best way to find out what Christmas means to each one of us is to think about what comes to mind when we think of Christmas. What are the images in your head? What does your nativity set look like? What are the sights of Christmas? Lights? Decorations? What are the sounds of Christmas? Songs? Bells? Laughter? What are the smells of Christmas? Something baking in the oven, like cookies? Spices?

Does anyone here think of Christmas and then imagine a dirty, smelly room and a baby crying?

Probably not, but that’s how the first Christmas was, when Jesus was born. From a worldly perspective, or a natural perspective, the birth of Jesus wasn’t special or attractive. There was nothing glorious about it. But God delights in doing amazing things in unexpected ways. And, as we’ll see this morning, the birth of Jesus is contrary to what we expect when we think of a King and a Savior.

We’re continuing our exploration of the Gospel of Luke this morning by considering only seven verses. We’ll be reading Luke 2:1–7. To give us a sense of context, let me quickly review what we have seen thus far in Luke.

Luke is one of the four Gospels in the New Testament of the Bible. Each Gospel is a biography of Jesus, focusing on who he was and what he did, particularly in his miracles, his teaching, his death on the cross, and his resurrection. Each Gospel has its own emphases, its own themes. Luke is interesting because it was written by someone who didn’t actually witness the events he wrote about. Luke says at the beginning of his Gospel that he wrote this history on the basis of eyewitness testimony. He used written documents, he interviewed people, and he combined those historical accounts of Jesus into this book of the Bible (Luke 1:1–4).

In the rest of the first chapter of Luke, he tells two related stories of how an angel of God announced the coming of two special children. The first child is John, better known as John the Baptist. He was born to an old couple who were previously unable to have children. John’s role would be to turn the hearts of the people of Israel back to God and to prepare the way for the coming of the second child (Luke 1:13–17, 75–79).

That second child is Jesus, the long-awaited anointed King, the Messiah or Christ. He is also called the “Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:32), or the Son of God. The angel Gabriel told Mary, a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, that Jesus would be supernaturally conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. This certainly was no ordinary baby.

Now, the time for Jesus’ birth has come. So, let’s read through this morning’s passage and then I’ll point out a few things this passage teaches us. Let’s read 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.¹

Here’s the first point I want to make: Luke is writing history. He situates the birth of Jesus during the time of Caesar Augustus, and also during time of Herod the Great. Herod was mentioned in the first chapter (Luke 1:5). Since he died in 4 B.C., this must have been prior to that time. Some of us may be surprised to learn that Jesus wasn’t born in the year zero, or the year 1 A.D. Well, there is no year zero. And the fact that he wasn’t born in A.D. 1 is due to the fact that the numbering of years didn’t come until centuries later. And Jesus probably wasn’t born on December 25, either. The reason that date is used to observe Christmas is because it was the date of a festival in the Roman Empire. If you want to know more about those details, you can read the article that I wrote, the one that is inserted into your bulletin.²

What’s important for us to see this morning is that Luke gives us two indications of when Jesus was born. It was during Caesar Augustus’s reign. He was the first emperor of the Roman Empire and he reigned for forty years (27 B.C.–14 A.D.). When he was born in 63 B.C. he was named Gaius Octavius. He was the grandnephew of Julius Caesar. When Julius Caesar was murdered (in 44 B.C.), he had named Octavius as his adopted son and heir in his will. Octavius then joined forces with two other men, including Mark Antony, to defeat Julius Caesar’s

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

² “When Was Jesus Born?” can be read at <https://wbcommunity.org/when-was-jesus-born>.

assassins. And when Octavius and these two other men fought against each other, Octavius prevailed. He was later named Emperor by the Roman Senate.

I'll talk a bit more about Augustus in a moment. For now, it's important to see that he was the most powerful man in the world at this time. And it was during Augustus's reign that Jesus was born.

Luke also mentions another name, Quirinius. He was governor of Syria a few years after Jesus was born. The reason he is mentioned is because Luke tells us that Augustus decided to have a registration, or census, taken in the Empire. Luke says this decree required "all the world" to be registered. This is a bit of hyperbole, but it's a phrase that was used of the Roman Empire (see also Col. 1:6). It's not far from the truth, since the Roman Empire included most of the world known to people like Luke. Augustus wanted this census to be taken in order to tax everyone living under his jurisdiction. In addition to gaining revenue for the Empire, it was a way of showing the people who was boss.

Some people think that this mention of Quirinius is an indication that Luke got his history wrong, because a census under Quirinius was taken in 6 A.D., some ten years after these events. I deal with this in the article I mentioned earlier. There are two ways of dealing with this issue to show that Luke wasn't wrong. One, it's possible that an earlier census was taken, or that this same census had begun years earlier and took a decade to complete. It's possible that an earlier census was overseen by Quirinius prior to his time as governor of Syria. It's also possible that the same census took a long time to complete, that it had begun under someone else's oversight, and that it was finished by Quirinius years later. So, that way of dealing with the issue states that we don't really know all the details of this period of history. That's fairly common for the ancient world. We don't know everything that happened. We have to rely on artifacts, most of which are ancient writings. Some things were never written down, and much of what was written has not survived decay and destruction.

The second way of dealing with this issue is to realize that perhaps verse 2 isn't translated correctly. The ESV says, "This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria." But a footnote in the ESV says it could be translated, "This was the registration before Quirinius was governor of Syria." That's because the Greek word translated as "first" could also be translated as "before."³ If that is case, then Luke is not wrong at all. In fact, in Acts, the sequel to

³ πρῶτος.

the Gospel of Luke, he tells of the effects that Quirinius's census had on the Jewish people—it led to a rebellion (Acts 5:37). So, Luke is basically saying, “The Roman Emperor called for a census. No, this wasn't *that* census, the one carried out by Quirinius. This was an earlier one.”

This census was taken according to Jewish customs, which had people return to their ancestral homes. Joseph, who was betrothed to Mary, was from the tribe of Judah and the line of David, the premier king of Israel who was from Bethlehem. Perhaps Joseph had inherited some property there. We don't know. What we know is that this registration required him to go to Bethlehem. We also know he took Mary with him. Perhaps they had already been married yet did not consummate the marriage, and that is why they are said to be betrothed. If that is the case, she might have been required to be with Joseph. I'm sure he wanted his wife to be with him when she gave birth. So, for that reason, they traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a journey that might have been about 90 miles or so.

The second thing I want to point out is that Luke probably wants us to compare Caesar August and Jesus. Augustus was the leader of the world's superpower. He was the most powerful man in the world. He received the title “Augustus,” which means “Illustrious One,” or “Exalted One,” when he became Emperor. He was also known as *Imperator Caesar Divi Filius Augustus*, or “Commander Caesar, Son of the God, the Illustrious One.” That is because Julius Caesar was viewed as being divine. Over time, the Roman Emperor was viewed as a god and he was worshiped.

Augustus was known for expanding the size of the Roman Empire to include more of Europe and Africa, for strengthening the Empire, and for establishing what was known as the *Pax Romana*, or “peace in Rome.” Ironically, that peace was achieved through violence. One way to achieve peace is to conquer your enemies with the sword until they submit.

If you asked anyone in the Roman Empire in those days who was the most important person in the world, the most powerful person in the world, anyone would say, “Caesar Augustus.”

But little did they know that the most powerful and most important person who ever walked the planet was being born in an unexpected place. Jesus, the King of kings, was born to a couple of humble people in a strange place, among animals. And he was placed in a feeding trough.

I should say now that some of the details of the Christmas story that we imagine aren't necessarily true. There's no mention of Mary heading to Bethlehem on a donkey. She probably walked, which would have taken several days. And when Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem, they weren't rejected by an innkeeper who said, "Bah! Humbug!" There is no innkeeper mentioned. In fact, the word that is translated here as "inn" might mean "guest room."⁴ Houses at that time were simple. They didn't have many rooms. There would be a main room for the people who lived there, a room for guests (because hospitality was necessary in a world without hotels), and perhaps a separate room for animals. Animals were brought inside to be kept warm. Or perhaps the body heat of the animals would help keep the humans warm. Joseph and Mary probably found lodging in someone's house, but they weren't put in the guest room. No, they were in a room with animals, which is why there was a manger there. And they placed their baby in that manger, or feeding trough.

There couldn't be a greater contrast between Augustus, the Emperor, and Jesus, the Messiah. I bet if you told people in their day that the most powerful king the world has known was about to be born, they would imagine that birth taking place in a palace in a major city. They would imagine that the parents were a king and queen. But Jesus was born to two ordinary people, and he was born among animals, probably in filth.

There's a children's Bible that we've read a number of times to our kids. It's called *The Big Picture Story Bible*. (We have a few copies on the back table, available for anyone who wants them.) This is what that children's Bible says about Caesar and Jesus:

This Roman ruler thought he was very important. One day he wondered to himself, *How will everyone know that I am the great Caesar, the Roman ruler, the king of the world? I know! I will count all the people under my rule. Surely that will show the world how great I am.* So Caesar, the Roman ruler, the king of the whole Roman world, began counting all his people to show everyone how great he was. What Caesar did not know was that God, the world's true ruler, the king of the universe was getting ready to show everyone how great *he* was. . . . And do you know how God was going to do this? Not like Caesar . . . not proudly, by counting all his people, but humbly, by becoming one of his people. In the power of his Spirit, God would bring his forever king into the world as a baby!⁵

⁴ The Greek word is κατάλυμα.

⁵ David Helm, *The Big Picture Story Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 235–241.

God often does the unexpected. He uses the small, weak, poor people more often than he uses the powerful and the rich. God delights in showing his strength through human weakness. God seems to enjoy doing things in a way that we would never imagine.

In Mary's song of praise, the Magnificat, she says of God,

- ⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
⁵² he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate (Luke 1:51–52).

God was doing just that in Jesus' birth. God even used Caesar to cause Jesus to be born in Bethlehem. If not for the census, Jesus would have been born in Nazareth. But it was prophesied that a ruler would come from Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2). God is greater than the greatest human beings, and even when they don't know him and claim to be gods, he can use them to do his will.

Jesus is the one who brings about true peace, peace with God. He didn't come the first time to set up a political kingdom, at least not in the way the world would imagine a political kingdom. He didn't come with a big army, ready to conquer the Roman Empire. He could have done that. But he didn't. The reason that Jesus came was to take care of our biggest need, our problem of sin. Sin is our rebellion against God. It's more than just wrong actions. Sin includes wrong desires and wrong motivations. It's a power that is at work within us, corrupting us from the inside out. What we need is someone who can remove our sin and make us right in God's eyes.

In Matthew's Gospel, an angel says to Joseph, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:20–21). Jesus came to save his people from their sins. He does that by living the perfect life that we don't live. Therefore, he fulfills God's requirements for humanity. But he also dies a death in our place, taking the penalty for our sin. When Jesus was born, he was wrapped in swaddling cloths. After he was crucified, his body was wrapped in linen cloths (Luke 24:12; John 19:40). We need to remember that Christmas led to Good Friday, when Jesus died to pay for our sins. And that story leads to the good news of Easter, when Jesus rose from the grave and cast aside those cloths. He was unbound, having defeated the powers of sin and death.

Augustus created a peace of sorts through military strength. Jesus creates real peace through his own death. The greatest man who has ever lived was not proud. He was humble, laying down his own life.

And that leads me to the third point I want to make: God comes down to us in our filth. We often have a nice, pleasant view of Jesus' birth, even though we know he was born among animals and placed in a manger. Our view of Christmas is sanitized. But the reality was that it was probably a filthy, foul-smelling environment.

Years ago, I read a book of Advent and Christmas readings. Some of these writings were by authors like C.S. Lewis and Martin Luther. Others were written by authors I didn't know, some of whom were Catholics. One such author was Giovanni Papini.⁶ He begins by saying Jesus was born in a real stable, one that was dirty, not the tidy stable of our imagination. He says that the only clean thing in the stable is the manger, where the hay is placed. (I can't imagine the manger and its way was too clean, but I suppose it would be relatively clean.) Then he starts to describe how the hay is made. He writes,

Fresh in the clear morning, waving in the wind, sunny, lush, sweet-scented, the spring meadow was mown. The green grass, the long slim blades, were cut down by the scythe; and with the grass the beautiful flowers in full bloom—white, red, yellow, blue. They withered and dried and took on the one dull color of hay. Oxen dragged back to the barn the dead plunder of May and June. And now that grass has become dry hay and those flowers, still smelling sweet, are there in the manger to feed the slaves of man. The animals take it slowly with their great black lips, and later the flowering fields, changed into moist dung, return to light on the litter which serves as bedding.⁷

That's a nice picture, isn't it? Where is he going with this? Well, we must read on:

This is the real stable where Jesus was born. The filthiest place in the world was the first room of the only pure man ever born of woman. The Son of Man, who was to be devoured by wild beasts calling themselves men, had as his first cradle the manger where the animals chewed the cud of the miraculous flowers of spring.

It was not by chance that Christ was born in a stable. What is the world but an immense stable where men produce filth and wallow in it? Do they not daily change the most beautiful, the purest, the most divine things into excrement? Then, stretching themselves at full length on the piles of manure, they say they are

⁶ Giovanni Papini, "Ox and Ass," in *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 236.

“enjoying life.” Upon this earthly pigsty, where no decorations or perfumes can hide the odor of filth, Jesus appeared one night.⁸

We take the beautiful things that God has made and turn them into filth. And Jesus came into that filth. And, as we’ll see later in the Gospel of Luke, people acted beastly towards Jesus and they killed him. This was all God’s plan.

Think about that. God stoops down and enters into our filth. We don’t have to clean ourselves up to get to God. No, he rolls up his sleeves and comes into the muck of this life to rescue us. That is what is amazing about Jesus and about Christianity. Religions generally say, “Do this and you’ll be acceptable to God. Do this and you’ll get to heaven, Paradise, Nirvana, etc.” Christianity says, “You can’t do that. Your sin taints all your efforts. You can never make yourself pure enough. You can’t save yourself to get to God, so God must come down and save you.” That is why Christmas is amazing.

And we must see that Jesus lived a real life. Yes, it started with a miraculous conception. But he lived as a human being. As a baby, he soiled his diapers. And I’m sure he cried. The familiar hymn, “Away in a Manger,” says “the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.” But that is silly. We have no reason to believe that Jesus wouldn’t cry. He cried as an adult, why not as a child?

The sights of the first Christmas included animals and probably a very simple structure with a dirt floor. The smells include manure. The sounds included a woman in labor and a baby crying. God enters into this environment to save us. He enters into our chaos, our noise, our filth.

Here’s a fourth thing that we should see in this passage: The baby Jesus is placed in a feeding trough. This is where the food for animals would be placed. Perhaps this is no accident. If we turn all the beautiful things that God has made in this world into filth, perhaps we need better food. And Jesus provides that food. He is our spiritual food. Food sustains life. Jesus says, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35). Of course, this is a metaphor. We “feed” on Jesus by trusting that he alone gives us eternal life. He alone can save us from our sin. He alone gives us true life. He alone can satisfy the deepest cravings of our souls. It’s no wonder that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, for Bethlehem means “house of bread.”

⁸ Ibid., 236–237.

No emperor could do this. No president or prime minister can. No businessman, no scientist, no professor, no celebrity, no entertainer, and no athlete can do this. Only Jesus can. He is the greatest person who has ever lived, yet he came humbly, stooping to our level to bring us up to his.

So, how should we respond to this message? I think there are two ways that people generally respond to Jesus. I suppose one way is the way of Caesar. We could rely on our own strength, too proud to see that we need a savior. We could say, "I find all that talk about being a beast and turning good things into crap offensive. I'm not like that." Perhaps we have some knowledge that we do need a savior, but we don't want to come under the authority of Jesus. If that is the case, we're responding with the way of Caesar.

Another way of responding is the way of Joseph and Mary, and, as we'll see tonight, the way of the shepherds. We can receive the gift of Jesus with joy and humility. We can submit our lives to God's authority. We can wonder that God would come to save lowly people like us. I must say this as clearly as possible: no matter how much you've fouled up your life, no matter how much you've taken beautiful things and turned them into excrement, Jesus can save you. Turn to him and trust him. Learn about him, believe that he is who the Bible says he is and that he has done what the Bible says he has done. Confess your sins to him and ask him for cleansing.

Jesus came as a baby, but this is no kids story. We dare not sanitize the story by making it a cute little tale. No, this is a real, gritty story. And because of that, it's a powerful story. Best of all, it's true. Jesus, the light of the world, entered into our darkness. Jesus, the only pure human who has ever lived, came into our mire. Jesus, who gives us the water of life (the Holy Spirit), came to clean us up. He did this at a great cost to himself. He is the greatest Christmas gift, and his salvation comes to us without price. Will you receive this gift?