

April 24, 2022

THE BIRTH OF JESUS, OUR SAVIOR

Luke 2:1-20

*(5 of 13 in a series through Luke 1-7)*

If ever my Ph.D. supervisor got asked to preach last minute, I noticed that he always went to the same text. He'd preach on Hebrews 2, which speaks about the incarnation of the Son of God. The first time I heard that sermon, it was in August, and he titled the sermon, "Christmas in August." I think I've actually heard that sermon from him when it was titled, "Christmas in October" and "Christmas in February" as well. Like I said, he'd always preach that same text when asked to preach last minute. And depending on what time of year it was, the sermon title changed. I guess the only time he really couldn't preach that sermon with that kind of title would be December, since Christmas actually *is* in December and so the title doesn't feel very clever then. This came to mind as I thought about the fact that I'm preaching Luke 2 in April. I thought, "I know what Steve Wellum would title it." For all I know, he may have been asked to preach last minute today and could be preaching a sermon titled "Christmas in April" right now.

But Christmas time is exciting, isn't it? And the idea of having Christmas multiple times a year is a fun idea. Getting gifts, taking time off work, and getting the family together are all exciting realities. And though it'd be hard to convince society to have another Christmas holiday, say, in June, and we know it's not going to happen, we can surely agree that we shouldn't limit ourselves to thinking about the incarnation and the birth of Christ to only one time a year near the end of December. Just like celebrating the resurrection shouldn't be limited to Easter, so we should find ourselves celebrating, rejoicing in, and meditating on the miracle that God the Son took on flesh and was born into this world as a tiny, helpless baby. It's an overwhelming reality to consider.

That's why I want us to consider the birth of Christ this morning as we see it in Luke 2. And as Luke tells the story of Jesus' birth, he actually frames the story in such a way that we're not only reminded of who this baby born in Bethlehem is, but we're reminded of how God works in the world and what Christ's work means for us. That's what I want us to see as we consider the story of Jesus' birth from Luke 2:1-20. First, Luke shows us that Jesus' birth reveals that God is directing history toward his purposes.

**Jesus' birth shows us that God is directing history toward his purposes**

One of the things that Luke has been careful to do throughout his gospel account is to show us that all the events he's writing about occurred in history. That is, Christianity is not a mythical story but is built upon real events actually transpiring in human history. So, for example, he began the account of the angel Gabriel appearing to Zechariah in the temple by saying, "In the days of Herod, king of Judea" (1:5), signaling its historical setting. Similarly, in the text we're looking at this morning, Luke begins, "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. It was the first registration when Quirinius was governor

of Syria” (2:1-2). Obviously, he is again showing us that what he’s about to tell us—the narrative of Jesus’ birth—is an actual historical event, occurring in human history.

But he’s actually doing more than that as well. Notice what’s happening. The Roman emperor declares that a census of the entire empire should be taken, and this most likely happened in waves, with a different region being summoned to register at different times. Moreover, registering required each individual to go back to his home town, and since Joseph was from Bethlehem, that’s where he was required to go. Of course, Mary—to whom he is betrothed—is about to give birth to Jesus, and so she goes with him. Therefore, the time falls for Joseph to go to Bethlehem, and they make the trip during the time when Mary is about to give birth—which she does. Thus, Luke tells us, “And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn” (v. 7). Thus, Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

And if we were ignorant of the Old Testament, we might think this is neither here nor there. Who cares where someone is born? But we, as Christians, care, don’t we? We care because the prophet Micah actually prophesied hundreds of years earlier that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. He’d said in 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.” This, of course, is a description of the Messiah, the Son of David, and the one who (according to many Old Testament texts) is the God-man who will rule forever.

Now, we’ve already noted all the evidence in Luke’s gospel to this point that identifies Jesus as the Messiah (and we’ll see more in this birth narrative itself). But if he’s really the Messiah, then it is necessary that he is born in Bethlehem. After all, that’s what God declared would happen through his prophet, Micah. And so he is. Jesus is born in Bethlehem.

But let’s ask some questions about this. How did it come to be that Jesus was born in Bethlehem? Well, Joseph and Mary traveled there so that soon after they arrived, she went into labor. But why were they going to Bethlehem in the first place? Well, it was because the most powerful man in all the world at that time—the Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus—declared that everyone in the empire had to go to their home town to be registered. So, we could say, the Roman emperor *just happened* to call for a census, that *just happened* to require Joseph to go to Bethlehem, that *just happened* to be at the time that Mary was going to deliver, so that it *just happened* that Jesus was born in Bethlehem as the Lord declared he would be. We could say that. But I think we all know that this isn’t what Luke wants us to see. The idea that these things all “just happened” doesn’t fit with what the Scripture shows us elsewhere.

God is not a passive observer of human history. Nor does the Scripture *merely* present him as one who knows what is going to unfold. Rather, the Bible pictures our God as the one who is in charge of human history. We are told, for example, in Psalm 115:3 that “our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases” and in Psalm 135:6, “Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all the deeps.” We are told in Ephesians 1:11, “In him we

have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.” And specifically we are told, “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will” (Prov 21:1).

And that is exactly what Luke wants us to see here. The Lord who sits in the heavens, doing all that he pleases, working all things according to the counsel of his own will, has turned the heart of the Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus to call for a census that will require Joseph and Mary to head to Bethlehem precisely because he is fulfilling his plan to have Jesus born in Bethlehem. In other words, the Lord is over all and is directing history toward his purposes.

This is who our God is and what he does. What this means is that the events of your life that led you to trust in Christ for your salvation, for example, were no accident of history. Our Lord directed your life to this end. For me that meant being raised just outside of Fancy Farm, Kentucky to Dan and Judy Tankersley who’d become believers a short while prior and taught me the gospel from a young age. For others of you, it meant the Lord brought you from the other side of the world to hear the gospel. And that’s just the start of my Christian life or yours, isn’t it? We could detail for moment after moment and how the Lord was directing all things to make us more like Christ—even things that were hard, bitter, and terrible at the time. But even if I can’t see how it’s working for my good, or you can’t see it in your life, we can still trust that it’s true.

And isn’t that the glorious benefit of seeing a truth like this in the Scripture? After all, we’re reminded every day that our life is so utterly out of our control. We don’t control our health in any absolute way. We can’t control many of the difficulties that come into our lives. And yet, at every point, we can rest in the fact that our Lord is indeed in control and is working all things after the counsel of his will for our good. If the Lord turns the heart of the most powerful man in the world at that time to do the very thing he needs to do for the Lord’s plans to be achieved, then surely we can trust him in the midst of our own struggles. And really this leads us to a second point: Jesus’ birth shows us that things aren’t always as they appear.

### **Jesus’ birth shows us that things aren’t always as they appear**

As a finite observer of what’s happening in this world, we don’t always see and interpret events around us accurately. And after some time we sometimes see that things weren’t as they appeared to us at the moment we first saw them. Well, we see that same truth in this text.

Everything about this narrative feels upside down from reality, doesn’t it? First of all, Luke tells us that when Jesus was born, Mary “wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn” (v. 7). But that doesn’t mean what we probably think it means. “Inn” is probably not the best translation here, and it doesn’t mean they were trying to check into a hotel in Bethlehem. Rather, what most likely happened is that Joseph reached out to family in the area to see if he and Mary might stay with them. However, because many other family members were coming to Bethlehem, there were others who’d requested the same thing. Consequently, there was no room in the typical guest room for this couple, but

there was another room—typically set off a bit lower from the main room of the house—where families would occasionally bring their animals in at night and house them. It was this room where Joseph and Mary stayed and where Jesus was born. And he was thus laid in a feeding trough that stayed there for when they brought the animals in and needed to feed them.

Therefore, although it's not an inn they couldn't stay at, you can't help but miss the point Luke is showing us that Jesus' birth is taking place in a lowly way. On the one hand, you have Caesar, barking orders that nearly everyone in the world responds to while you have the true king of the world being laid in a feeding trough. If we were just a passive observer of world events at that point, we wouldn't interpret things around us to understand that the Lord was doing something powerful, but he was.

Similarly, you have an angel deciding to show up and announce the birth of Jesus into the world. But to whom does he appear? Perhaps some world leader? Nope. He appears to "shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night" (v. 8). And though for many of us who know our Bibles, the role of a shepherd has become an elevated vocation in our minds, it really wasn't. Yes, David was a shepherd, but that's because he was low in his family. Shepherds were among the lowest of the low class in society. And yet they're the ones who get the good news. They're the ones to whom a multitude of angels appear praising God. They're the ones who get to go see the child and relay the message of the angel.

Do you see? Everything is being turned on its head. The one who is seemingly lowly is actually the exalted king. And those who are seen as outcasts are the blessed crowd to whom heaven first announces the birth of Christ Jesus. In God's wisdom things in this world aren't always as they appear.

And this too is good for us to keep in mind. You and I aren't always in a position to perceive things rightly. On any given day, it might feel like the mission of the church is doomed or God's people will lose in the end. We can feel as a church that everything is against us, and so we should give up on pushing forward with the Great Commission and just hunker down and survive. But we know better, don't we? The gospel will go forth and Christ will vindicate his people on the last day. So we, as the church, simply keep pushing forward, trusting our Lord no matter how dark the skies seem. Martin Luther once wrote, "By His Spirit, God will bless and further this work which he has graciously given us to do, and he will find the fitting time, place, and method to help us. He will neither forget nor forsake us. Those men of blood have not yet accomplished what they are now undertaking. . . . Our rainbow is frail and their clouds are mighty, but it will appear in the end to whose tune we shall dance."<sup>1</sup> This is what Jesus' birth teaches us: things aren't always as they appear. Third, Jesus' birth shows us that Jesus is our Savior, King, and Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, Vol. 18 of *Library of Christian Classics*, ed. Theodore G. Trappert (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 157.

## **Jesus' birth shows us that Jesus is our Savior, King, and Lord.**

As the angel appears to the shepherds and announces the birth of Jesus, note how he describes Jesus. He says, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.'" (vv. 10-11). That's who Jesus is. He is our Savior, King, and Lord.

In Matthew's gospel, when an angel told Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, he'd told Joseph, "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21). As our Savior, the Son of God comes into the world in order to save us from our sins. And the reason our sins are such a big deal is because they deserve the wrath of God. Consequently, Jesus came into the world in order to become a sin offering for us. On the cross, Jesus bears the wrath of God in order to satisfy divine justice toward our sin. That is the only reason that those of us whose faith is in him will not ever see the wrath of God. It's not because our sins don't deserve it, but it's because he's borne it for us. He is our Savior.

And he is our King. The reference the angel makes to Jesus as the Christ means he is the Messiah, or, we might say, the promised king who would come from David's line. Jesus reigns as King. As Hebrews 2 reminds us, we don't see everything in subjection to him, but we do know that he reigns, and he is working all toward the day when he will come and get his people.

And he is the Lord. He is God the Son. He is the God-man. Though there are many who will testify that Jesus is a great teacher or prophet or the like but no more, the Bible simply won't allow us to hold that position. It's the Bible that tells us again and again that Jesus is divine. The angel in this text who speaks to the shepherds tells us. When he calls Jesus "Lord," we might be tempted to downplay it, but remember how God speaks in the Old Testament, saying, for example, "I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior. . . . I am the LORD, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King" (Is 43:11, 15). In a world where every nation recognized its own gods, the God of Israel—the one true God—noted that he alone was King over the world, he alone the Savior of his people, and He alone the Lord. And now, the angel announces that this newborn babe "a Savior, . . . Christ the Lord" (v. 11). The categories that—when taken together—apply exclusively to God in the Old Testament are being applied to Jesus here. That's what Luke is telling us. This wasn't a slip up where Luke wrongly suggests Jesus is God the Son. He knew what he was writing, and he wrote it intentionally. Jesus is our Savior, King, and Lord. And, finally, Jesus' birth shows that we can have peace with God.

## **Jesus' birth shows us that we can have peace with God**

After the angel announces to the shepherds that Christ has been born, a multitude of angels appear and start praising God, saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased" (v. 14). Perhaps having peace with God is a reality we're tempted to take for granted, but we shouldn't. The Scripture testifies that all of us have sinned and consequently are deserving of everything that sin merits. We deserve the condemnation

and wrath of God as sinners against our creator and judge. And yet he's created a means to justify us—to declare as righteous we who are anything but righteous.

He did this by sending his Son, born of the virgin (as we see in this text) so that he might live a perfect life of obedience before dying on the cross and rising from the dead. And what happens when you and I place our faith in Christ for our salvation, is that his perfect obedience gets credited to us. He doesn't count our sins against us and does count Christ's righteousness as for us. And therefore we're justified, or declared righteous through faith in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. And Paul tells us, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 5:1).

We have peace with God. We're not condemned. We're loved. We get to live all of our lives knowing that we are approved of before God because of Jesus. That's what it means to have peace with God. And that's what we learn Jesus came to bring us as we came into the world. But note that it is only those "with whom [God] is pleased" who have peace with him. That is, it is only those who bend the knee and trust in Christ for their salvation. Therefore, come to him now.

And if you're already trusting in him, we see what our response to Jesus' life and work for us should be in this text. The shepherds and the angels praise and glorify God. Mary ponders—or meditates—on the glorious reality of Jesus. The shepherds go forth and tell others about him. May that be our response as well, and may we live in light of the realities that his birth reminds us of. Our Father is directing history and our lives to his purposes. Things aren't always as they appear. Jesus is our Savior, King, and Lord. And we have peace with God. That is a reason to trust, rest, obey, and love our Lord above all else. May that be our reflected desire now as we come to the table. Amen.