

A Most Unusual Birth

Luke 2:1-7 | Pastor Jason Van Bommel

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. – Luke 2:1-7, ESV

The Sovereign God in Swaddling Cloths

Several stories and movies have featured rulers who don a disguise and go out among their people as a poor peasant. Whether it's the Prince & the Pauper switching places or Princess Jasmine donning a disguise so she could sneak out of her palace, storytellers have enjoyed exploring the idea of the ruling elite leaving the safety and isolation of their palaces in order to live like the rest of us. In 1995, Joan Osborne had a hit with a song written by Eric Bazilian, "One of Us," in which she asked "What if God was one of us?"

All of these stories and Joan Osborne's have an appeal to something deep in the human psyche that I believe was put there by God. And, in the end, none of these stories can hold a candle to the real story of the King of the Universe, the One who dwells in inapproachable light, becoming a baby boy and being wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger.

The stooping God did when He was born as a baby is something we cannot begin to comprehend. Augustine of Hippo, the church father who lived in the late 300s and early 400s, put it this way: "Man's maker was made man that He, Ruler of the stars, might nurse at His mother's breast; that the Bread might hunger, the Fountain thirst, the Light sleep, the Way be tired on its journey; that Truth might be accused of false witnesses, the Teacher be beaten with whips, the Foundation be suspended on wood; that Strength might grow weak; that the Healer might be wounded; that Life might die." - **Augustine of Hippo**

A. The Imperial Census (vv. 1-3)

In Luke's account here in Luke 2, the story begins with an imperial census: "*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.*"

The man who was born Octavian in 63 BC was named the adopted son and heir of Julius Caesar in 44 BC and then fought and ascended to the throne in 27 BC. He was acclaimed the Senate and given the title Augustus, meaning “the exalted one” or “the illustrious one.”

Caesar Augustus was a ruthless power-hungry man who was nonetheless an effective ruler and administrator over a vast empire. He established a pattern of conducting a census of His empire every 14 years or so. This pattern was so effective it was picked up in our Constitution, which sets the requirement to conduct a census every 10 years. Caesar was also wise enough to know that conducting a census for the purposes of establishing taxes can potentially stir up trouble in a large empire. Rome ruled over various parts of its empire differently; some places came under direct Roman rule, while others – including Judea – were ruled through vassal kings. In the time of Jesus’ birth, King Herod ruled over Judea but the Roman Governor who supervised the surrounding area, known as Syria, was Quirinius.

The relationship between Rome and her vassal kings was a complex and sometimes tense one. One of the accommodations Rome likely made to keep local peace was to allow local kings to do the census in the way most fitting to their local culture and to give them some flexibility over when they would carry it out.

The census of Luke 2 was the first census Rome conducted over Judea. Augustus probably initially requested that it be done around the year 8 BC. We know this because the next census was done in 6 AD (an infamous one which led to riots and revolts in Judea). Yet this census was probably not actually begun until around the year 6 BC and was not finished until sometime after the year 4 BC. King Herod the Great probably died in the year 4 BC, so Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the administration of this census, probably sometime in the year 4 BC.

It’s funny to think that Jesus was probably 4 years before Christ. In reality, the calendar dates were set hundreds of years later and the people who developed it made the best calculations they could based on the information they had, but they probably were off by 4 or 5 years.

Yet why would Joseph travel to Bethlehem to register for the census? Because Herod the Great, the king of Judea, wanted to be received by the people as a true Jewish king, and so he tried hard to respect Jewish customs and establish his own understanding of and respect for Jewish traditions as much as possible. Thus, he decided to conduct the census in line with Jewish cultural norms, but having people register in their ancestral

cities. It was clever of him to do this. His son, Herod Archealaus, didn't follow this pattern in 6 AD and tried to do a census Roman-style and it led to widespread riots and revolts which got him removed from being king.

Why am I giving this historical background? Think about all of the various factors that had to line up to get Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem in time for the birth of Jesus: Caesar Augustus had to issue a decree, which had to be controversial enough for a delay to take place in carrying it out and then freedom given to local customs, which Herod the Great then had to have the wisdom to use in order to do an ancestral/tribal registration – all of this to get a virgin girl and her new husband from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea.

And why was God so eager to get Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem in time for the birth of Jesus? To keep His promise He had made over 700 years earlier 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.*

Now, we shouldn't think that God was scrambling to figure out how He was going to get His Son to Bethlehem in time for His birth. In truth, all these circumstances had been foreseen and foreordained by God. God rules over the affairs of men. Nothing takes Him by surprise, and He can orchestrate even the most complex and challenging circumstances to accomplish His purposes. This should give us peace, especially when things seem politically unstable or chaotic. God is still in charge and is still working out His plan!

B. The True Royal Family (vv. 4-5)

The other thing the mention of this census does is to highlight the difference between the Roman imperial ruler, Caesar Augustus, the Judean royal pretender, Herod, and the true royal family, traveling in humble circumstances to Bethlehem. In the world's estimation, the real power in the world was in Rome, and the local power was to be found either in the Roman governor or in the local Judean king. Yet the world's perspective is always mistaken. Where the world looks for power and prestige is almost

never where God is working His power and plan for His glory and the good of His people. So we read of the real royal family when we read verses 4-5:

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.

Mary's travel to Bethlehem was at least the second time during her pregnancy that she had made the trip from Galilee to Judea. She may have also traveled for Passover or Tabernacles. People walked a lot more in Jesus' day than we did. For devout Jewish people who lived in Galilee, walking 80-90 miles each way to and from Jerusalem three times per year was a normal part of life.

By the way, according to some biblical researchers, Jesus walked at least 21,525 miles in His relatively short life, from the age of four or five to age 33. This walking included 400 miles from Egypt to Nazareth; 18,000 miles from Nazareth to Jerusalem and return by age 30; and 3,125 miles during his three-year ministry.

Mary is here referred to as Joseph's betrothed, but Luke is using this term to indicate that they had not yet consummated their marriage, which is what Matthew tells us in 1:24-25, that Joseph "took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus." So they were married, but they remained physically separate until after Jesus' birth.

C. The Time Came (v. 6)

Mary was "with child" when she and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem, and then "And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth."

This language also echoes Micah 5, picking up in verse 3:

*Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has given birth;
then the rest of his brothers shall return
to the people of Israel.*

⁴ *And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.*

*And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth.*

⁵ *And he shall be their peace.*

God had given His people up to foreign rule and domination. From 586 BC, when they went into captivity in Babylon, the people of God were almost continuously under foreign rule “until the time when she who is in labor has given birth.” With the birth of Jesus, the Roman political occupation of Jerusalem and Judea doesn’t end; something better happens: God brings His king into the world to establish a new kind of kingdom, one which extends to all of His people around the world, one in which His people are guarded and led by the eternal King who shepherds them in the strength of the LORD, and in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.

In fact, Micah 5 is so important to understanding Luke 2 and the birth of Jesus, it’s no surprise we find the story of the shepherds here. The shepherds are called to come and honor the Good Shepherd, the promised Shepherd-King of Micah 5.

Some people have imagined Mary in labor pains as she and Joseph enter Bethlehem, desperate to find a place for her to have a baby. Yet that’s not how Luke 2 reads. They came to Bethlehem for some period of time for the census, and while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.

D. The Baby in the Manger (v. 7)

Last week, we talked about speculation when we discussed Mary’s greeting of Elizabeth. Honestly, there are few sections of Scripture that have been the source of more speculation than Luke 2:6-7. Luke’s language is simple and even sparse:

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 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.

That’s it. Yet people have used their imaginations to create a whole story of going from house-to-house, looking for a place to have a baby, being turned away by a busy and usually rude innkeeper. It would seem that Joseph and Mary were staying someplace for the census, and that while they were staying there, she went into labor and gave birth to Jesus. There was “no place for them in the inn” for the baby to be born and nursed, etc. That’s why they “laid Him in a manger”

So, what was happening here?

The word which is translated as “inn” here is a very flexible word in Greek. In Mark 14:14 and Luke 22:11, this word is used of the Upper Room, where the disciples had the

Last Supper with Jesus. So, it can mean an inn, but it can also mean a guest room, often located on the upper floor of a house.

The simplest reading of Luke 2 would probably translate this word as “Upper Room” or “Guest Room.” There was no room for them in the guest room. In Bethlehem and the surrounding hills, many families actually lived in cave homes. They provided strong shelter, stable temperatures and saved on construction costs. If you put a wall and a door across the front of a cave, you have a home. It’s very hobbit-like.

The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, built 1700 years ago, identifies the place of Jesus’ birth as a cave. If this is right, the cave could have been a stable separate from the house, or the cave might have been the house. It’s very possible, and a very natural reading of the text, to think that Jesus was born in a cave-home. At one end of the home was the guest quarters and at the other end of the home was the area where young animals were brought in at night for protection from the cold.

The truth is we don’t know for sure. Why not? Because it’s not that important. What’s important here is not where Jesus was born but that He was born and how. Luke leaves out many details, but he repeats three times the detail that Jesus was wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger, in verses 7, 12 & 16.

Why This Lowly Birth?

So, why was Jesus wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger? Part of the reason for this kind of birth is to emphasize the humility of Christ’s birth. He was born in a low condition because He came to serve and to save.

Athanasius of Alexandria, in his classic work, *On the Incarnation*, writes this:

The Lord did not come to make a display. He came to heal and to teach suffering men. For one who wanted to make a display the thing would have been just to appear and dazzle the beholders. But for Him Who came to heal and to teach the way was not merely to dwell here, but to put Himself at the disposal of those who needed Him, and to be manifested according as they could bear it.

Or consider the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

Only the humble believe him and rejoice that God is so free and so marvelous that he does wonders where people despair, that he takes what is little and lowly and makes it marvelous. And that is the wonder of all wonders, that God loves the lowly.... God is not ashamed of the lowliness of human beings. God marches right in. He chooses people as

his instruments and performs his wonders where one would least expect them. God is near to lowliness; he loves the lost, the neglected, the unseemly, the excluded, the weak and broken.

The humility of Christ, wrapped in strips of cloth and laid in an animal feeding trough, speaks of His character and His mission, for He came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many.

Yet the manner of Jesus' birth was also a sign for the shepherds. In 1883, Alfred Edersheim wrote *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, and in it he explained that these shepherds were likely those at Migdal Eder, the night watch shepherds, given charge over sheep that were to be used for sacrifice in the Temple. So these shepherds would have been very familiar with the concept of the spotless lamb for the sacrifice. Lambs would be wrapped in swaddling cloth and placed in the manger until they were stable enough to stand and walk without injuring themselves and thus getting blemished.

Why this lowly birth? Because Jesus came to humble Himself and serve. And because He came as the spotless lamb. That's why God sent shepherds to be the first witnesses, which you'll hear more about next week from Bruce Fiol when he preaches on verses 8-20. Tonight, as we re-gather for our Christmas Eve candlelight service, we'll focus our attention on Mary once again as we consider her reaction to all of this, which was to treasure up all these things, pondering them in her heart. I hope you'll be able to join us.