

Kingdom Decrees
Luke 2:1-7
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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

Introduction: Kingdoms in Conflict

The old line about an alien invasion is that the aliens would land and demand: "Take me to your leader!" How would we, as a world, respond to this request/demand? Who is our leader? Would we take the aliens to see President Trump? Is he in charge? Would we take them to the United Nations building in New York City?

As Americans, we almost resent the idea that anyone is in charge of us. We don't have a leader here. Mussolini was hailed as Il Duce, "the leader," Hitler was called "Der Fuhrer," the German equivalent word for "leader." We don't do that fascist style of leadership here in America.

To become a Christian is to acknowledge a leader of your life. The earliest Christian creed, expressed in the New Testament is simple: "Jesus is Lord."

if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord!" and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. – Romans 10:9, ESV

It's a simple and powerful proclamation. The word for "Lord" is *kurios*, which means "master" or "ruler." Roman citizens were taught to say, "Caesar Kurios" - Caesar is Lord. The Christians said, "Jesus Kurios" – Jesus is Lord. The profession is not that Jesus is MY Lord but that He IS Lord!

Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says "Jesus is accursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit.

– 1 Corinthians 12:3, ESV

The simple profession, "Jesus is Lord," had another significance: *Kurios* is the word used for YaHWeH, or "the LORD" in the Greek translation of the Hebrews Scriptures, the Old Testament. For your common Greek-speaking Jewish person in the Greco-Roman world, this Greek Bible was their regular Bible, the one they read and understood, just like we all read English Bibles. And it was clear to these Greek-speaking Jewish people that Christians were professing not only that Jesus is the master and ruler, but that He is YaHWeH, the LORD, in human form.

This is the understanding behind the famous verses in Philippians 2 –

*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant,^[5] being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. –
Philippians 2:5-11, ESV*

So, the Christian profession was, from the very beginning, controversial and confrontational. Jesus' kingdom is in conflict with all other attempts to establish some other Lord and Master, contrary to Him. And we shouldn't think that because we're not Roman or Jewish and we're leaderless Americans, we're free from this conflict. In America, the kingdom Jesus comes to confront is the kingdom of SELF. We cannot worship the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the unholy trinity of Me, Myself & I. No one can serve two masters!

I. Caesar & Quirinius, vv. 1-2

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Luke 2 is perhaps the most read and most famous chapter in the Bible, and it begins with a reference to one of the most famous and powerful rulers in the history of the world. Caesar Augustus was born Gaius Octavius. His grandmother, Julia, was the sister of Julius Caesar. Julius Caesar was murdered in 44 BC, and in his will it was discovered that he had named Gaius Octavius as his son and heir. Thrilled with this news, he changed his name to Gaius Julius Caesar. Then, in the year 27 BC, after a brief civil war, the Roman Senate anointed him emperor, giving him the title Augustus, which means "majestic, sublime, highly exalted." Thus, he was named Caesar Augustus.

Caesar Augustus thought very highly of himself. He accepted not only the title Augustus but also Pontifex Maximus, Highest Priest, making him the head of all religious worship throughout the Empire. And while he did not allow people to worship him directly as a god, he did insist that his father-figure, Julius Caesar, be named and worshipped as a god, and he allowed temples to be built to "Rome and Augustus."

As emperor, one of the things Caesar Augustus liked to do was count his people. Apparently, Augustus began the practice of conducting a census every 14 years, which continued until at least the year 230. This census was apparently carried out by local officials and was done in keeping with local customs, which in Israel involved having everyone go to register in their ancestral hometown.

II. David, Micah, and Joseph, vv. 3-4

And all went to be registered, each to his own town. 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

So, why is Caesar Augustus issuing decrees calling for a census of the Roman world? I'm sure he had his reasons, which are unknown to us, but more importantly, we can see from these opening verses of Luke 2 that God had

His reasons for the census. God had to get a pregnant young lady from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea, a distance of about 80 miles, some of which is over some rough terrain. Now, God could have sovereignly arranged some local, personal, private reason to compel Joseph and Mary to go to Bethlehem. But He is the Lord of all, and He arranges all things according to His will, and so He moved the heart of proud Caesar Augustus to call for a census and the local administrator, Quirinius, to carry this task out according to local customs, respecting Jewish values and having the Jewish people register by family in their hometowns or ancestral hometowns.

In other words, God is arranging everything perfectly for the birth of His Son and doing so in a way that demonstrated His sovereign rule over all things.

Joseph, of course, knew he was of the house and lineage of David. Jewish people kept careful track of their ancestry and were very proud of their most renowned ancestors. My sister has been researching our family history on Ancestry.com, and it's been fascinating to find out more about our ancestors from hundreds of years ago.

For Joseph and the Jewish people, ancestry was more important than just a fascinating diversion. The people of God were waiting for the promised Messiah to come and deliver them from oppression. They knew the Messiah would come from the house and lineage of David, because God had promised to put a Son of David on David's throne forever. Those who knew their Scriptures well also knew that the Messiah was promised to be born in Bethlehem in Judah in Micah 5:2.

Bethlehem and Nazareth have another interesting connection: Prior to the birth of David, Bethlehem was a very small and easily overlooked town near Jerusalem. It was not listed in the names of the towns belonging to the tribe of Judah in Joshua or Judges because it was so small. Likewise, Nazareth, 80 miles to the north in Galilee, was so small it is not listed or mentioned in any of the ancient records, until Jesus came from there. David grew up doing a simple job, being a shepherd, in a small town, a life of ordinary obscurity. Jesus grew up working in Joseph's workshop, known as the carpenter's son, in a small town, another life of ordinary obscurity. And yet today, Bethlehem and Nazareth are two of the most famous and visited towns in the world, all because of what God did through David and David's Greater Son, Jesus.

III. Mary & God's Perfect Timing, vv. 5-6

Joseph was not alone as he traveled to be registered in Nazareth:

to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.

Mary was with child as she traveled to Bethlehem with Joseph. We don't know how far along she was in her pregnancy. We always picture her as about to give birth any day, but that may not have been the case. We know she had to be at least three months pregnant, for she spent the first three months of her pregnancy with her cousin Elizabeth in the Judean hill country, helping with the pregnancy and delivery of John the Baptist.

What we do know is that she was pregnant, and both she and Joseph knew that her baby was very special, a miraculous gift of God who has given with great promise – *“He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”* - Luke 1:32-33

I think Mary and Joseph also knew their Scriptures well enough to know that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. This was fairly well known. When the wise men came to find the newborn king of the Jews, the scribes were able to tell Herod to send them to Bethlehem. Furthermore, in John 7, when the crowds in Jerusalem are arguing over whether Jesus could be the Christ or not, some of them ask, *“Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?”* (John 7:42, ESV)

So, Mary knew her child was special, a gift from God, the promised heir to the throne of David, and she was travelling to Bethlehem, knowing the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. It’s reasonable to think Joseph and Mary were not in a hurry to return to Nazareth, and they may very well have been in Bethlehem for a few weeks or even a couple of months before Jesus was born.

However long the time was is not important. What is important is this: *“while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.”* This simple expression is full of meaning: The days were fulfilled, or the times were brought to completion. It’s the same vocabulary that lies behind Galatians 4:4-5: *“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.”* The time had not just come for Mary’s delivery of Jesus, but for God’s delivery of His people. It was not just the firstborn son of Mary who was born into the world, but the long-awaited, much-anticipated hopes of all of God’s people for all of the ages was born, wrapped in swaddling cloth, and laid in a manger.

IV. The Details of Jesus’ Birth, v. 7

Luke’s language regarding the birth of Jesus is very simple and sparse: *“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.”*

From this single, simple verse, we have created whole elaborate storylines and scenes: A busy and rude innkeeper who pushes the travelling family aside, a barn or a stable filled with animals, etc.

To clarify:

- I. First of all, the word translated “inn” here can be used of a designated place of rest for travelers. However, in the story of the Good Samaritan, the word used for the in where the Good Samaritan takes the wounded man is a difference word. In fact, the word used here is the same word that’s used for the Upper Room on the night of the Last Supper. It can be translated as “guest room” or even as “dining room.”

2. While a manger is mentioned specifically here, a stable is not. It was not unusual for people to bring their animals into the house at night, especially if it was going to be cold, which is often is at night in Bethlehem, which sits at about 3,000 feet above sea level.

So, we don't have very many details, but based on what we do know, it's just as likely that the normal guest room of the house where Joseph and Mary were staying was crowded and so they were in the main room of the house. It does seem like they were among the animals, although no animals are specifically mentioned. If they were staying in a cave home, which are common around Bethlehem and have been for thousands of years, and the earliest Christian traditions say Jesus was born in a cave home, then the animal area was just at the other end of the cave from the sleeping area, and giving birth over there would certainly have been easier and more private.

Still, Jesus is born in a simple home birth and is wrapped in swaddling cloths – not a nice, soft receiving blanket, but strips of cloth that bound him and restricted his movement – and He was laid in a manger, a feeding trough for animals. It's a humble and simple birth, and Jesus is born to humble, simple, poor parents.

What a contrast this king and His kingdom make when compared with Caesar Augustus. We have a passage that begins with a royal decree from the “majestic and highly exalted” Caesar, and we end with a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and laid in an animal feeding trough. Caesar Augustus was so pompous that he had a month of the year renamed in his own honor, after the previous month had been renamed for his adoptive father, and so our hot summer months are July and August. Jesus issued no such self-serving decrees. He insisted on no such earthly honors. His birth was simple and his life was humble. His submissive obedience to His Father was perfect, and His willing death was brutal and humiliating. Yet His birth split time in two, and the calendar restarted with His coming into the world!

That Tension Between Trust & Control

We began our message this morning thinking about the questions of leaders. In our passage, we have seen a contrast between the proud and majestic Caesar Augustus and the simple birth of the Lord Jesus. Caesar Augustus thought his census decree showed his control over his empire, but it really demonstrated God's sovereign control over all of human history. Joseph and Mary were summoned by a Roman census not to fulfill the purposes of Augustus but to fulfill the promises of God. In 33 years, the Jewish leadership thought their successful plan to have Jesus nailed to a Roman cross would show their mastery over Him and silence His followers. Instead, the cross showed God's love for His people, fulfilled God's perfect plan of salvation, and freed God's people from the corrupt leadership of the chief priests.

Augustus thought he was the supreme leader, the majestic and exalted one, the highest priest. But Jesus was all of these things and more. The chief priests thought they were in control and were convinced their plans could not fail. But God showed Himself to be in control and showed that His plan is the only one that truly never fails.

At the beginning of our time together, we saw that the most common leader people claim to follow in our culture is SELF. We think we're in control. We think our plans are coming true and can't fail. We trust in ourselves and our goodness, our ambition, our agenda. But God is showing us something more true and

profound in today's familiar passage, and He is calling us to a high and holy calling. Will we surrender our illusions of control, bow the knee before King Jesus this Christmas, and trust the Lord with our coming New Year? Will we serve His kingdom, trust in His power, and live for His glory now and forevermore!