

Good News: A Baby Lying in a Manger

Luke 2:1-20

Mark Vroegop

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. ⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" ¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. Luke 2:1-20 (ESV)

When I was a young child, I can remember a number of family traditions surrounding Christmas. For instance, there was a candy-cane "count-down-to-Christmas-calendar" that became a daily reminder as to how close we were to the special holiday. We would always celebrate our family Christmas on Christmas Eve morning, because on Christmas Day we had a second Christmas at my grandparents'. On the day of our family celebration, my mom would usually have cinnamon rolls, orange juice, and good coffee ready for breakfast. Even today the smell of cinnamon rolls brings back some great childhood memories.

My sister and I had a tradition that we would wake up as early as possible (usually around 5 a.m.), and try to occupy ourselves with board games like Monopoly until my parents woke up around 7 a.m., which was the established wake-up time on Christmas Eve. We would gather in the living room, a place in the house that we only used about five times a year, and then we would distribute all the gifts at once, trying to act as though we were not counting them. After cinnamon rolls were distributed and fresh coffee served, we were ready to open gifts. Except for one thing: the reading of the Christmas story.

My Dad would read a portion of Luke 2, and then we would pray, thanking God for the special moment we were about to share. Now I put my faith in Christ at an early age, and I loved the Bible. But, if I'm honest, Luke 2 quickly became a text not to be savored or appreciated, but something to get through in order to see if the parents bought the right presents.

So when I hear Luke 2, it is a loaded passage for all the wrong reasons. It is so familiar and so traditional that it almost loses its meaning and importance. For some of you, the text reminds you more about some family tradition or a *Charlie Brown Christmas* than it does about the spiritual significance of Advent. In the midst of our traditions, we can lose the traditional meaning of the passage. We can lose the significance of what a particular text is all about.

That's why I've chosen Luke 2:1-20 as my passage for today. I want to take this familiar and traditional text and help us understand the significance of what is here. Luke 2 can be too familiar, and we can miss the beauty and power of the text and, for that matter, this entire season.

Unpacking the Christmas Story

Let's take a look at the details of the story and see what we can learn. The aim of Luke's gospel is to put into writing an account of the life of Jesus so that believers can have confidence in what they have been taught (1:3-4). The purpose of Luke 2:1-20 is to explain how Jesus was born into the world. Where did it all begin? Luke shows us the setting, the birth, and the announcement.

Setting

The birth of Jesus took place under the sovereign direction of God in the midst of the circumstances of life. The Son of God invaded a tumultuous world with earthly people, political rulers, real cities, and a tax census.

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. Luke 2:1-3 (ESV)*

The text begins with a general introduction "in those days" and makes no mention of a specific date. Luke's aim was not to nail down the exact day that Jesus was born but to explain the meaning connected to His birth.

Caesar Augustus (born Gaius Octavius) was the Emperor of Rome. Do you know much about him? He was the nephew of Julius Caesar, and he became an adopted son and heir to the throne through Julius Caesar's will. He shared power with two other Roman leaders for a while after defeating Cassius and Brutus, the assassins of Julius Caesar. Eventually Octavius consolidated his power, and in 27 B.C. the Roman Senate conferred on him the title of "Augustus" which meant "the exalted one." His 44-year reign is considered by many to be the golden age of Roman culture, and he worked to reorganize the chaotic empire, enacting economic reforms. ¹ The census that Luke wrote about may very well have been a part of his attempt to bring order and structure to the Roman Empire.

¹ Elwell, Walter A., and Barry J. Beitzel. "The Caesars," *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* 1988 : 392-393. Print.

We also see that Luke mentions another ruler named Quirinius in Syria. What Luke exactly means by this reference and the mention of the “first registration” is not entirely clear. We know, according to the historian Josephus, that Quirinius ruled Syria from A.D. 6-7 and conducted a census in A.D. 6 (see Acts 5:37). But the census in Luke 2 has to be before the death of Herod the Great in A.D. 4 since Jesus was born during his reign. Therefore, either the word “governor” means that he was the administrator or ruler of the census prior to A.D. 6 (maybe an earlier role), or the word “first” in verse 2 should be translated as “before” and the verse should read “. . . this registration was before Quirinius was governor of Syria.”²

The effect of the registration was, according to verse 3, a requirement that every person return to their home town. This must have created massive numbers of people who were traveling back to their family homes, and apparently it was the best way for Rome to get an accurate count of the people.

Don’t miss the fact that Luke sets the narrative of the birth of Jesus in the midst of the Roman Empire, taxation, a census, and named leaders who marked the eras in which they lived. In many respects, the setting is very common and typical of human history. Kings are ruling. Taxes are being levied. A census is being taken. But it will be anything but typical, as we will come to see.

Birth

Verses 4-6 provide the specifics regarding the birth of the Christ-child, which is the purpose for Luke’s writing this section of Scripture. There are many important details that are given here.

Joseph is mentioned first in verse 4 since he was the one that needed to be registered. This is only the second time that Joseph is mentioned in Luke. The focus of chapter one is mostly on Mary, and the first time that we hear Joseph’s name is in 1:27, when Luke describes Mary as “*a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David.*” In both Luke 1:27 and in 2:4-6, it is very clear that Luke wants to make the point that Joseph and Mary are betrothed and that Joseph is from the line of David. Being “betrothed” is important to preserve the virgin birth of Jesus. Joseph was not the biological father (Matt. 1:25). Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). But Joseph does provide an important family connection to the Davidic line and the historic promise of God to have a descendant from the family of David rule over Israel.

We learn about their travel plan which is more than just an explanation of their itinerary. Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth in the region of Galilee, and they needed to travel to Bethlehem, since that was the home of origin for Joseph’s family. Nazareth was a small, isolated and insignificant town. It “lay outside the mainstream of Jewish life.”³ Bethlehem, however, had historical significance. It was known as the City of David because it was the birthplace of David (1 Sam. 17:12). Bethlehem would have likely been a small village about five miles south of Jerusalem.

It is significant in Old Testament prophesy because Micah 5:2 predicted the birth of the Messiah in the city of Bethlehem:

² Crossway Bibles. *The ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008. Print.

³ Elwell, Walter A., and Barry J. Beitzel. “Nazareth,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* 1988 : 1531. Print.

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. (Micah 5:2)*

And, according to Matthew 2:16-18, it was also the terrible site of an infant genocide at the hands of Herod in his psychopathic attempt to eliminate a challenger to the throne. Bethlehem was an important and tragic village.

In verses 5-7 we learn about the specifics of the birth. Mary is with Joseph, she was “with child,” and the time for birth came. While she was not required to travel to Bethlehem, it is safe to assume that Joseph did not want to leave her in Nazareth with the pregnancy nearing its end. And then we read the famous line regarding the birth of Jesus:

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 2:7)*

A number of words and phrases are important. The child is identified as “her firstborn.” This statement is connected to the virgin birth, sets up the presentation in the Temple in Luke 2:22ff, and unlike another word which means “only son,” this allows for the future children that will be born through Mary and Joseph’s marriage after the birth of Jesus (see Matt. 1:25 and Luke 8:19-21).

The Christ-child is wrapped in swaddling clothes, which was a long piece of linen or strips of cloth that were wrapped tightly around babies to limit their movement.⁴ And Jesus was famously laid in a manger, a feed trough or stall for animal food, because “there was no place for them in the inn.” New Testament scholars suggest that since Bethlehem was such a small village that the “inn” was a crude overnight lodging place for travelers, and that there was no suitable place for Mary to give birth. The much maligned innkeeper in folklore may not have rejected Mary and Joseph as much as they were seeking an appropriate place for labor and delivery.

The point, more than anything else, is that the Christ-child was born in humble circumstances. In the historical context of mighty empires, imperial rulers, ruthless kings, and powerful armies, the Messiah is born in a tiny village and in a manger. The ironic entrance of the Christ-child becomes a harbinger for the life of Jesus and the message of the gospel. God will elevate the lowly and the humble and reject the proud and mighty of this world.⁵ The Christmas story is embedded with a clear message that will take full shape in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus about 30 years after this glorious moment. But Luke clearly wants to highlight - as God wants to highlight - that the Messiah’s entrance into the world will be very different than what anyone would have thought or predicted. Deliverance is coming, but not as you would expect. There is Good News to share, and it involves an unlikely sight: a baby in a manger.

⁴ Brand, Chad et al., eds. “Swaddling Clothes.” *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* 2003 : 1542. Print.

⁵ Stein, Robert H. *Luke*. Vol. 24. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992. Print. The New American Commentary.

Announcement

Now the birth of every baby is an event to be announced. But the birth of deliverers, heirs to thrones, or those for whom people have waited years, should be announced royally, right? Remember all the fanfare and anticipation when Prince George was born to William and Kate? The world waited for the first glimpse of him.

The announcement of the birth of Jesus was a spectacular moment but only for a few people in Bethlehem, and they were as unlikely as where He was born. The divine announcement was made to a group of shepherds. They are yet another example of the irony of this moment because shepherds were not a well-respected lot. Shepherds were considered an unclean group by the standards of the law, and they had a reputation for being dishonest.⁶ Given the fact that they are “keeping watch over their flock by night,” we can assume that they are living outdoors as their sheep are feeding on the pastures in the countryside of Bethlehem. Don’t miss the fact that the first people to learn about the birth of the Messiah were literally outsiders and those at the margins of society.

What happens next must have been a sight to behold. According to verse 9, a single angel appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them. In other words, they were suddenly in the presence of an angel and a bright light surrounded all of them. The text tells us that they were filled with fear by this encounter with the angel. The glory and power of what they were seeing caused them to fear for their lives. This was the same response that Zechariah had in the temple (1:13-20) and the same reaction that Mary had at the appearance of the angel (1:28-37).

What is interesting to note in all three appearances – Zechariah’s, Mary’s, and the shepherds’ – is that the angelic announcement follows the same structure: 1) an angel appears, 2) the people fear, 3) a word of assurance is given, 4) a message is delivered, and 5) there is a provision of a sign.⁷ If you look at all three examples, you’ll see the format emerge.

Verses 10-12 contain the divine message:

¹⁰ And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” Luke 2:10–12 (ESV)

A few things to note:

- The words “good news” are the Greek word *euangelizo*. The noun form of this word is translated as “gospel,” and the verb form is the source of the English word evangelism.
- “All people” is announcing something that will become even more evident in the rest of the New Testament, namely, that the Good News is now going to spread to people beyond the nation of Israel.

⁶ Stein, Robert H. *Luke*. Vol. 24. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992. Print. The New American Commentary.

⁷ Ibid.

- “This day” is announcing that the long awaited time of deliverance has finally come.
- “A Savior . . . Christ the Lord” is connecting the fact that Jesus is both the Messiah and is the authoritative ruler over all.⁸ What’s more, it is identifying the divine nature of this child since God himself is talked about in this kind of language (see 1:47). Peter uses the same language in Acts 2:36 at the sermon after Pentecost, identifying that the crowd had crucified Jesus, who was both Lord and Christ. This title is the foundation of our hope for forgiveness. (More on that at the end.)
- The sign they are given is familiar to those who are reading Luke, but it must have been startling to the shepherds: the Messiah was to be found as a baby and in a manger. It must have struck them as odd.

What happens next must have been unbelievable! Just let your imagination take you there. After the single angel finishes the announcement, the entire night sky is filled with “the heavenly host.” This term is used for the army of angels, and there is a multitude of them or there are too many to be numbered. These angels join together in declaring (notice: not singing, despite the carol “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing”) *“Glory to God in the highest, and on earthy peace among those with whom he is pleased”* (Luke 2:14). The NIV renders this *“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”*

That message is really the hope of what Jesus, as the Messiah and Savior, will bring. He will give glory to God, and He will bring the peace of God to those who are made favorable to God. The book of Romans put it this way: *“ . . . since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”* (Rom. 5:8). Within the announcement of the angels is the essence of what the gospel is all about. The angelic words are the mission of Christ and the mission of the church after His resurrection.

The announcement text ends with the response of the shepherds. They are the first to hear the Good News, and their response is instructive. After the message was received and understood, they “made haste” and found Mary, Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. The sign verified the message of the angels.

¹⁵ *When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.”*¹⁶ *And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.*¹⁷ *And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. Luke 2:15–17 (ESV)*

And this pericope ends with two responses on the part of Mary and the shepherds. Mary, according to verse 18, “treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.” She reflected on what she had been told by the angel, what now had transpired with the shepherds, and what it meant for the future of her son and for the nation. She did not know the full story at this point.

⁸ Ibid.

The shepherds were so amazed at what had happened that they were rejoicing and telling people about what had happened to them:

¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them . . . ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. Luke 2:18-20 (ESV)

They apparently became the first evangelists, sharing the Good News with those around them out of amazed and joyful hearts. They quickly moved from being the recipients of the Good News to being the sharers of that Good News.

So this is how Luke introduces Jesus to the world. This is how he begins the story of the redemption of the world. He sets the birth of Christ in the midst of human history and political policy. He identifies key elements of the story of Jesus' birth, and he records certain elements in order to drive home some very important points about the Christmas story and the broader message of the gospel. This narrative is more than just the Christmas story; it is the beginning of the coming redemption through Christ. It the dawn of the Good News!

Understanding the Christmas Message

What do we make of this narrative? What is Luke communicating through the details of this story? What is so special about this scene in Biblical history? Let me suggest a number of truths for us to consider this time of year:

1. God rules over all

The setting of Luke 2 is meant to communicate that in midst of Empire building, the reign of Emperors, taxation policy, and challenges (such as traveling 85 miles while pregnant) are all set under the sovereign rule of God and His eternal purposes. The Empire of Rome, Caesar's ascent to the throne, Herod's rule over Judea, and the relocation to Bethlehem were all directed and guided by the sovereign hand of God. And in the midst of all the chaos and brokenness that is in the world, God was working out His plan.

I love how the Psalmist says it in Psalm 46:6-7 – *"The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress."* Luke 2 shows us that most of the world had no idea what had happened in Bethlehem, but a sovereign God had already begun to work out His beautiful plan.

2. God keeps his promises

The Christmas story also reminds us that part of the beauty of what transpired in Bethlehem was the fulfillment of a promise that God had made to David regarding one of His descendants ruling on the throne of Israel forever. 2 Samuel 7 was a promise given to David, and yet the sinfulness of the people of Israel and Judah had led to their national destruction, a partial restoration of Israel, a Gentile occupier with Rome, and a "King" who was neither fully Jewish nor a descendant of David. It looked, no doubt, as though God had forgotten His promise – until the Advent of Jesus.

The words “the city of David . . . of the house and lineage of David” are not just words! They are the hopeful fulfillment of what God had promise generations ago. And while it must have seemed as though God had forgotten, the Christmas narrative shows us that it is only a matter of time and that God will be true to His word. 2 Peter 3:8-9 gives us this hope in the New Testament:

⁸ But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. 2 Peter 3:8–9 (ESV)

God keeps His promises. Therefore, we can trust Him and believe, even when things are unclear.

3. God’s plan is full of powerful humility

The whole story of the gospel is backwards and upside down to how we would normally think. Mary said it very well in Luke 1:52 – *“he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate.”* The Savior of the world, the Messiah, arrives in a humble manger in a non-descript village through the womb of an ordinary woman and is announced to unimpressive shepherds. He arrives as a helpless baby who needs to be wrapped in swaddling clothes. And this baby will eventually grow up, live as a man, preach about meekness, and He will die the death of a criminal. He will, according to Philippians 2:8, humble Himself *“to the point of death, even the death of the cross.”* And His example will become not only the means of salvation, but also the model for how the followers of Jesus should live. *“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth”* (Matt. 5:5).

4. Good News has come to all people

Why were the shepherds rejoicing, and Mary pondering, and the angels declaring the glory of God? Because a Savior, who is both Lord and Christ, has been born! God had set in motion the deliverance of His people once and for all. The long awaited deliverer had finally arrived, and everything was about to change. In the book of Matthew (1:21) Joseph is told that the child will be named *“Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”* The Messiah has come in order to deliver people from their greatest foe: their own sinfulness.

The Good News is that this baby in the manger will grow up, He’ll live perfectly, He’ll reveal the Word of God, and He’ll prove that He truly is the Son of God. And then He’ll die in order to make it possible for people to be forgiven of their sins. That is Good News, and it is a story that is worth reading over and over, because the world is broken, we are broken, and we need a Savior. Luke 2 is more than just a traditional story; it is the dawn of the gospel, the Good News that Jesus has come to save us from our sins.

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