

Sermon: When Jesus Came

Text: Luke 2:1-20

Gary L. Wackler

December 21, 2008

Introduction: Down through history there have been literally billions of babies born. All of them a little different in some way, but very much alike and also the same as others. Jesus' birth was very unique in many ways. And if we were going to make up a story, this would not be it. We would have affluent, influential parents, and certainly not from an unimportant place like Nazareth.

The more you read and study Scripture, the more one realizes that God sometimes works against extraordinary odds with very unexpected people from a human perspective.

Let's look at some of the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth:

Luke 2:1-4 (NIV) ¹In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ²(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³And everyone went to his own town to register. ⁴So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.

When Jesus came:

I. Pagans Worked for God.

Make no mistake; God is Lord over history!

A. Augustus

Augustus was the nephew of Julius Caesar who was assassinated in 44 BC. In 43 BC – Second Triumvirate was established - made up of Octavius (Augustus), Anthony, Lepidus. Soon there were two. Lepidus was found to be too weak.

Queen Cleopatra had also been the mistress of Julius Caesar → Anthony and Cleopatra in 30 BC committed suicide after Alexandria was captured. – January 11, 29 BC was the triumphant return of Octavius as Savior of the Republic and the Restorer of Peace. – Then he was named *Augustus*, which means “reverend,” “venerable” (only attributable to divinity before this). Augustus was the “high priest” for the state religion of which he was the deity.

But Augustus only provided the backdrop, what was called *pax Romana*, for the birth of the greatest conqueror and king. Jesus would be, and is forever, Lord of lords and King of kings and Caesar's LORD.

B. Quirinius

Quirinius was a favorite of Augustus as could be seen with his rise up through the ranks. It is "possible that Quirinius served in the campaign which ended with Augustus' victory at Actium (31 B.C.)." - Anchor Bible, V, 589

The census by Quirinius made it necessary according to Luke's gospel for Joseph and Mary to leave Nazareth and go to Bethlehem where Jesus was to be born according to O.T. prophecy. It was the custom that every 14 years there would be a census/registration for military enrollment and tax purposes.

C. Herod the Great

Herod was a heavy-handed, death-dealing despot who toward the end of his life tried to kill the baby Jesus, but magi were summoned by a star to warn Joseph and Mary of the plot and they fled to Egypt again fulfilling prophecy.

The Jews were exempt from military service because of the political influence of Herod the Great. He had rebuilt the temple about which was said: "Whoever has not seen the Temple of Herod has seen nothing beautiful" (Brown, When Jesus Came, p. 49). This temple would provide the backdrop and imagery of many of Jesus' teaching and ministry.

So it was that an imperial decree from a pagan emperor carried out by a Syrian official would cause prophecy to be fulfilled and the birth place of the Messiah moved from what most certainly would have been Nazareth to Bethlehem. (An 80-90 mile journey to the south.)

When Jesus Came:

II. The Most Unlikely of God's People Were Used.

A. Young and poor (unestablished)

Luke 2:5 (NIV) ⁵He (*Joseph*) went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

Joseph and Mary were not officially married but still recognized as husband and wife as Matthew makes clear as well.

Luke 2:6-7 (NIV) ⁶While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Jesus' circumstance at his birth was there was no room in the inn only a Stable/ Manger/ Cave – 2nd Century tradition – Church of the Nativity

Mary was unattended except for Joseph. They were both dependent on God with little in the way of finances. Just days later, they would give what poor people do for an offering (2 doves and 2 pigeons) for their new son (Leviticus 12:8, Luke 2:22-24).

I can certainly tell you a lot more about my children's birth than I can about Jesus'. We have only two verses of sparse detail.

Yet, we know from Scripture that Jesus' birth was unique in many ways:

Cause – H.S./ not a natural father

Kind – Virgin birth. There had been no sexual relations.

Reason – to produce a legitimate Savior and to fulfill God's words through the O.T. prophets

Purpose – to provide the only way a person can be saved through faith in him.

Illus. My son, David's birth took 26 hours of labor. We do not know how long Mary was in labor. Teresa was surrounded by nurses and doctors as she gave birth. Joseph and Mary - "These two, busy with the chores of childbirth under the most difficult of conditions, do not themselves experience heaven's visit but hear of it from the shepherds. How unusual! But theirs is the baby, and that is enough."

- Craddock, Luke, p. 35

We lived in Troy, Ohio and traveled to another town (8 or 9 miles) to a hospital two blocks from Teresa's parents. There was no imperial degree that got us there. It was a Ford Torino.

Jennifer's birth was sudden/ yet expected – what was not expected was the 45 minutes of labor. Teresa wrapped Jenni in the best dress I could afford, not strips of cloth when we brought her home. Our daughter laid down her head on clean sheets, Jesus had an animal feeding trough.

Then come the:

B. Shepherds (of all people)

uncouth/ slovenly/ smelly/ irreligious/low-class

They were excommunicated by the Orthodox Jews.

It was not Herod/ Caesar/ or the High Priest ... but shepherds who were **FIRST** told the glad tidings by angels.

Shepherds were some of the last individuals *we* would have picked, yet --

1. They received a message from God.

Luke 2:8-14 (NIV) ⁸And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” ¹³Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

2. They investigated what they had been told.

Luke 2:15-16 (NIV) ¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” ¹⁶So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

3. They shared their findings with others.

Luke 2:17-20 (NIV) ¹⁷When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

As a result of *When Jesus Came*:

III. Luke Shares Some Theology.

Jewish tradition had it that when Messiah came:

- 1) Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.
- 2) He would be seen/revealed from Migdal Eder (“the tower of the flock”)

This was not a watchtower for the ordinary flocks but the ones designated for temple sacrifice. This was near Bethlehem where the best grazing was. “Behold the Lamb of God” – takes on new significance.

The Messiah would do away with the need of two lambs being sacrificed at the temple every day. It certainly could be, although we do not know, that the shepherds even talked to Simeon and Anna who would see Jesus later in the temple.

Let’s discuss some of the theology here. Jesus’ birth fulfills prophecy:

A. Jesus is of the house of David (v. 4)

Micah 5:2 (NIV) ² “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

B. Jesus has many titles (v. 11).

1. He is called Savior
Matthew and Mark, though, never call Jesus Savior, only Luke.
2. He is Christ (Messiah)
3. He is LORD. “Christ is Lord” is a confession of the church.

C. Jesus brings peace - and it is for all people (vv. 10, 14).

Isaiah 9:6 (NIV) ⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Zechariah 9:9-10 (NIV) ⁹ Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. ¹⁰ I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Yet this is no universalism here where everyone is saved. There are conditions, and one condition that Luke brings up time and time again is repentance. Man must accept God's invitation of grace and mercy.

D. A final word about shepherds.

“The LORD is my Shepherd.” Luke ties Jesus to the idea of a shepherd-king. David is referenced, not just for the purpose of family-tree issues, but because of Luke's guest list for the kingdom of God: “the poor, the maimed, the blind, the lame ([Luke 14:13, 21](#)). And so the shepherds go to the city of David. The shepherds and the scene are described with some of Luke's favorite words, words he has used before: wondering, pondering in the heart, making known the revelation, praising and glorifying God. The stable is bare, but the glory of God floods the story.” - Craddock, Luke, p. 36

Conclusion: “In the history of the church there have been many so poor and abandoned as to be able to identify with this scene. In many quarters, however, the church has not resisted the temptation to run next door to Matthew and borrow his royal visitors with their gold, frankincense, and myrrh ([Matt. 2:1-12](#)), place a soft light in the manger straw, and fill the air with angels. Luke has a glow in the story, but it is shining elsewhere, in the shepherd's field.” -Ibid, p. 35

Many people have served God's purposes in history, sometimes even unconsciously, just like Augustus Caesar and Quirinius and Herod the Great.

Today for us the question is will we like the shepherds hear a divine witness, investigate it, and then share it with others?

Tyranny in England and Europe brought Christianity to the new world nearly 400 years ago. Sometimes it is adversity, even the harshness of slavery in Egypt that may serve God's purposes.

Many of God's people down the years have *consciously* served God, e.g. the prophets, the apostles, the great reformers Luther, Wesley, Calvin. Even in the Restoration Movement, Alexander Campbell, Barton Stone, et. al. served God.

We have discussed historically, even theologically what has happened “When Jesus Came” – But Jesus is alive and He is Lord, today! What does one do in this present context when Jesus comes? – When He is here – When He is truly “Emmanuel,” God With Us?

Luke 2:11 (NIV) ¹¹Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

Verse 11 announces through the angels who this Jesus is.

He is Savior

He is the Christ, the Messiah

He is Lord!

What do you do with this information - either new for the first time, or realized for the first time?

If you are a Christian you should follow the example of the shepherds.

Luke 2:17 (NIV) ¹⁷When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child,

And as we have opportunity, let us follow their godly example.

If you are not a Christian, and you now understand who Jesus is, you should come to Him today and accept Him as *your* Savior.