

Luke 2:1-20

The King's Arrival

We are going to Luke chapter 2 today.

Luke 2:1-5 “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.”

I. Sovereign Caesar (Luke 2:1-5)

Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor, is ruling much of the known world. Herod, who is also involved in the Christmas narratives, was local, Caesar was national. Herod heard about the coming birth of Jesus and was concerned about it because he was threatened by them calling anybody else a king, but Caesar Augustus certainly didn't hear about it. He is not at all concerned with the birth of a Jewish baby in Bethlehem - he is concerned about bigger things (he thinks they're bigger things.)

In fact, the big thing that Caesar Augustus seemed to be concerned about was himself.

Augustus was the nephew of Julius Caesar, but was adopted to be his son and made heir. There was a civil war after Julius Caesar's death, and Augustus emerged as one of three equal leaders alongside Lepidus and Mark Antony. They had their differences, so Augustus killed them off and eventually reigned by himself, kicking off the longest period of peace in Roman history, the Pax Romana. So he was known as the king who brought peace to the empire through power, violence, and fear.

The roman leaders were often worshipped as gods, Julius Caesar was declared a God at his death and worshipped by the people. But Augustus was an overachiever and took it to the next level: he actually encouraged the cult worship of his name while he was alive.¹ So people would essentially “go to church” to worship Augustus Caesar - cultic worship of the emperor was a new thing. His birth name was Octavian, but he took the name Augustus which means majestic or holy,² worthy of reverence and worship.

¹ James R. Edwards, The Gospel According to Luke, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2015), 68.

² Ibid. 67

There were coins that were struck with his image on them said, "The divine Caesar and the Son of God."

There was even an inscription discovered that said his "birthday signaled the beginning of good news (greek gospel) for the world."³ In 17 BC, a strange star appeared in the sky, Caesar's comet, so he had an Advent celebration for 12 days so the nation could worship departed Julius Caesar and celebrate the coming of Augustus. So Augustus loves him some Augustus.

He's a powerful god-king, worthy of worship, he thinks. He has achieved much through fear and power.

And here Augustus issues an edict that everybody has to go to his home town to be registered in a census. He is counting his people, measuring his strength.

But this he is also subjugating the jews more fully. This census was essentially signing up to be taxed by Rome, when in the past temple taxes were paid by the jews as worship to God alone. Now the emperor is going to tax them, and they all need to go to their ancestral home town to sign up for the privilege of being taxed by the occupying empire. Imagine if, to pay your property taxes, you were forced to travel 80 miles by foot and pay them to a government you despised.

So he's counting the people, he's subjugating the jews, and he puts this huge burden on them. And it hits Joseph and Mary extra hard because Joseph has to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, with Mary, to register. This is an 80 mile trip they have to make and she is very pregnant. Debbie has had 4 babies. And at 32 weeks pregnant, she never expressed interest in going on an 80 mile donkey ride. This isn't what they wanted to be doing.

And here's the nagging thought that would have been plaguing the Jews - the oppression by Rome was now at an all-time high. So they have to be wondering, "Were the stories we grew up believing true? The stories about God leading us out of Egypt and to this promised land so we could be free to worship Him without fear? Because that isn't what's happening. Maybe those were all lies. And if they were true, maybe we blew it so badly that God has completely walked away from the covenant He made with our forefathers. Maybe it's all over."

³ Ibid. 68

II. Sovereign God (Luke 2:6-20)

So the god-king makes a ruling, they have to obey, and it couldn't have come at a worse time:

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.

Have you ever taken the road trip where everything goes wrong? The minivan breaks down, someone gets sick in the back, you get lost, you leave a suitcase back at the motel, you're in a strange place so you're already a little stressed.

This year for Mary and Joseph has been quite the ride. She got pregnant, he thought of not marrying her and calling off the engagement, but an angel appeared and told him not to do that. She suffers shame and scorn from her community, now they have to take this trip because of a tyrannical king's order, thinking maybe they can make it home to Nazareth before she gives birth. And now, for some inexplicable reason, the one who is "so favored by the lord" has to have a baby under the stars in a little hick town called Bethlehem.

There's a lot of folklore that gets added to these stories - stories about Mary having a painless birth, and "little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes." But there's no evidence that this was a supernatural birth. It was a supernatural baby, conceived by the Holy Spirit in the virgin's womb, but a regular birth in terrible conditions - away from home, with no vacancies in the hotels, and a feeding trough for a crib.

Obviously, God has lost control of this situation? Out of control big government is ruining what God is up to in the world, the girl from Nazareth is giving birth in Bethlehem, not so much of a silent night where all is calm, all is bright.

So it looks like the one running the world is Caesar Augustus, and things are going badly for Joseph and Mary, the descendants of King David from Israel. Majestic Caesar, the "son of god", appears to be on the throne. And he is paying no attention to this Jewish teenage mom or her baby. In fact, Augustus died in 14 AD, having probably never learned about the Christmas story that he is featured so prominently in. And he certainly wouldn't

have had any idea why the year would later be numbered 14, and not the Roman year 767 AUC as he knew it.

So a lot went wrong on that first Christmas. It was chaos, from a human perspective.

But from God's perspective, all is calm and all is bright.

God was in charge of this whole thing. He used a megalomaniacal king who thought he was a god, to issue an unjust edict and an oppressive law, to move Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem, so that Jesus could fulfill the prophetic saying that he was a Nazarene, and to fulfill the promise from Micah:

**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.**

What seemed to be the end of God's covenant faithfulness to the Jews - this edict from Caesar that subjugated them, was actually the instrument God used to fulfill His covenant promises to the Jews.

Soon after this, God used Herod's evil edict that the male children around Bethlehem should be killed to drive Joseph, Mary and Jesus into hiding in Egypt, to fulfill what Hosea had said in Hosea 11:1, "out of Egypt I called my son."

The light from the far off star that had been traveling through space for ages showed up in the sky in just the right place to guide the wise men.

When everything seemed to be going wrong it was all going according to plan - but none of it seemed that way then.

From our perspective 2000 years later, we can see a perfect plan coming together. Christmas works like clockwork, it's so well engineered and designed. But they couldn't see it. But the fact that they couldn't see it didn't mean it wasn't happening.

God was using everything, all of creation, and even the wicked decisions made by arrogant kings to fulfill his plan:

Proverbs 21:1 1 The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.

God is the King of all the other kings on earth. A lot of people can come to think they are in control of things. Kings and presidents and company owners and landlords and parents and bosses and pastors may come to believe that they are sovereign, but God is ruling over them.

There were all kinds of plots and plans against God's people. Augustus Caesar oppressed the Jews, Herod was seeking to kill Jesus specifically. But these decisions were ultimately under God's hand of sovereign control and He turned them to fulfill His purposes.

Proverbs 16:1 The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD.

Proverbs 16:33 The lot is cast into the lap [*“the die is rolled”*], but its every decision is from the LORD.

Remember why Doctor Luke wrote this book - to give faith and assuage doubts. And the circumstances in Bethlehem, from the inside, gave all kinds of reason for doubt. Is God still in control, does He still care, has He abandoned his people?

Part of the message to us is that we don't have to see how God is working out his plan to believe that he is.

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).

But often we sit as God's judge and ask for exhibits and evidence that He knows what He is doing. We demand a full explanation of how it will all play out and what His plan is. We treat him like He answers to us, and He is guilty until He proves Himself innocent.

We often live like we are the all-knowing, sovereign judges. We live like we are the majestic ones, worthy of worship. Our hearts aren't all that different than Caesar Augustus's.

God proves in this Christmas story that He has this whole thing under control. That God has never ceased to govern the world, preserve the world, and care for the world so that it fulfills his intended purposes.

And even if the rulers and leaders never acknowledge God's sovereignty, even if they deny His existence all together, even when they try to replace Him like Caesar did, God is still using them as his pawns to steer history exactly where he wants it to go.

God is sovereign and will use even wicked kings and wicked decisions to make sure His plan is fulfilled.

You see this in the cross of Jesus. There, the rulers of the world commit a horrible sin. They nail Jesus to the cross. Evil rulers crucify the Lord, and everything went exactly according to God's plan. Even the evil king's heart was like a stream of water in the hand of the Lord, being steered where God wants it to go.

So if the reason for your doubt is because of circumstances, or because God doesn't seem to be working things out the right way, remember that it only seems that way.

So many have turned away from the faith because they are so disappointed in God. But to feel disappointment in God is to say "I know better, I know how this will all play out, I know what's best, I could have made a better plan." It's an arrogant claim.

We just don't have all the information. And 2000 years from now, if God gives that many, Christians will look back on our day and our hardships and see the ways God was using them all as part of His plan. And even if they can't, in 2000 years we certainly be able to say that God does all things well.

Christians are people of faith. And faith is believing in some things we cannot see. We can know they, we can be sure of them, but we can't see them. We'll often see God's goodness, but when we don't see His goodness, we can trust His goodness. When we don't see how God is working all things for our good, we trust that He is.

Because we believe the message of the cross - which was the place where God took the worst sin ever committed (killing Jesus,) the most hopeless situation imaginable (the Savior dead and buried), and turned it all for unimaginable good: the Savior rises to life, debt has been paid, wrath absorbed, and whoever believes has everlasting life. Not a plan we would have invented or a story we would have cooked up - but a true one. And if God did that then, we can trust He will do it in smaller ways in our lives.

William Cowper was an old hymn writer who struggled greatly with depression and with trusting God's goodness, but he wrote a hymn called God Moves in Mysterious Way:

God Moves in a Mysterious Way

*God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.*

*Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs
And works His sovereign will.*

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.*

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.*

*His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.*

Blind unbelief is sure to err

*And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.*

II. Sovereign God (Luke 2:8-20)

It also would have been easy for people who only ever saw one kind of king and one kind of power to be confused by how God was doing things at this first Christmas. Kings are announced in palaces, with trumpets and fanfare. The nobles come out in droves when a baby is born to a king.

But this announcement was to ordinary people:

Luke 2:8 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.

So this is perplexing. The angel is announcing that a Savior is born. And that meant he was a rescuing king. But he was being announced to shepherds. They must have been thinking, “why us? Did you get the wrong address, Gabriel?”

Shepherds probably don’t care much about royalty. They go out and watch sheep in the field, and if there’s a new king over the land, they will go out and watch sheep in the field. They aren’t power players in society, they aren’t influencers. They hardly had any instagram followers at all.

But the angel goes straight to them, to announce there’s a king. The glory is shining, this is clearly going to be an amazing king, but why the shepherds?

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!”

Again, this is perplexing. “You’ll find the king in a feeding trough!” And when that is announced, a multitude of angels show up to worship Him. There’s glory displayed to shepherds, there’s a king but he’s in a trough, and now there’s an army of angels declaring God’s glory in it all.

And this would be a king who brings peace to His people.

Remember, they already had a king who brought peace in Caesar. But he was born to royalty, he was born with a golden spoon in his mouth, he was worshipped as a god, he never saw a feeding trough, and certainly never laid in one.

Power and glory had never been displayed this way before.

Luke 2:15 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.

This was a totally different kind of king. They were used to kings who reigned through violence, but this was a king in a manger.

They were used to a king who brought peace by killing his adversaries, but this was a king who made Himself helpless.

They were used to a king who fought his way to the top to reign, but this king was reigning from a stable.

This was a different kind of king who, from the beginning of his earthly life, went to low places.

He went to a sinner’s party:

He went to meet with a promiscuous woman at a well in a shady town (John 4).

He broke the cleanliness code by taking a dead girl by the hand in Matthew 9.

He went to an adulteress's trial (John 8).

And he went to a sinner's cross

Luke 23:32-38 “Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. 33 And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. 34 And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And they cast lots to divide his garments. 35 And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!” Luke 23: 36 The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine 37 and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” 38 There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

From the beginning to the end of his life, Luke is contrasting the rulers who rule with fear and violence, the rulers who scoff, and the Christ, the ultimate ruler. The authorities and powers are presiding over the Ultimate Power, but He is down in a low place with the criminals.

The He went to the lowest place, and was buried in a tomb, he went all the way down to death.

And it was only after he had descended as low as you could go that He rose again, and is now seated at the right hand of God's throne. In Acts 1, Luke will describe Jesus ascending into heaven and being hidden from the sight of his followers until His return.

It would be easy to doubt His reign, when He reigns in a way that is so different than we would expect. But this is our King. He is our Sovereign. He really does reign, and we are a real part of His kingdom that has grown for 2000 years straight in every corner of the world.

But the fact that He is our king, He is the one we follow, means that the way of life in His kingdom must be very different. It's a kingdom where the greatest became least, where the way to the top was all the way down, and where crowns are made out of thorns.

If our king goes to the absolute lowest place, then this must be an upside down kingdom with values that are very different than the kingdoms in the world.

It's a kingdom where the greatest and most powerful make themselves less than others to serve them.

Luke 22:24-27 “**24 A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. 25 And he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. 26 But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. 27 For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.**

It's a kingdom that gives us power not to reign as kings, but to serve and lay down our lives for others. A place where we

Romans 12:10 “**10 Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.”**

There's a mad race in this kingdom, a race to honor others more than ourselves. A clamoring for significance: the significance of others:

Philippians 2:3 “**3 Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.”**

It's a place where the way to really gain life is to give your life:

Luke 9:23-24 “**And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. 24 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.**

It's a place where the way to the highest seat at the table is by going to the lowest seat:

Luke 14:8-11 “When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, 9 and he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘Give your place to this person,’ and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. 10 But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. 11 For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

When Jesus came to a low place at Christmas and progressed on to a lower place on the cross, He did what it took to save us. But He also showed us what the way of life is in His kingdom. The most powerful one in our Kingdom, demonstrated his power by laying down his life for us and rushing to the lowest place in the universe.

In Jesus kingdom, way to reign is to serve.

Way to be happy is to not try.

The way to find yourself is not to go looking, but to lose yourself.

Out in the world, you think you only have joy when you get to the top, so you always fight your way to the top, step on everybody else, and never find the peace and safety you're after.

But this kingdom is different. Here, the way up is down. The way to real joy is to give yourself not to exalt yourself. The most powerful place is the cross. And the least here is the greatest.

We can't worship a Sovereign who reigns like that and still strive to be better than others, to put others down, to be the center of attention, to be important. Let's be people who, rather than stepping on everyone else to get to the top, lift others up to get to the bottom. Because Jesus told us that's where true greatness is.

Christmas showed us that our king brought a whole new way of things.

He's a real king, but wields his power in very different ways.

And as his followers, we follow.

And we won't always see how that works out, we have to look at life and results with the eyes of faith. But we trust that He is sovereign, and His promises are true. That if we just keep going lower in humility, eventually, He will invite us to the higher place for our reward.

So Grace Group leaders who do the hard work of leading a community to trust Christ, and who don't see results and see the hardships of life, God is working things for good.

You might be tempted to try to change people in a heavy-handed way, but this shows us that people are changed through sacrifice and giving yourself, not through angry power and demands.

Parents might be tempted to change kids through fear, but our king changed us through service. Kids workers might be tempted to give up because it doesn't appear to be working. But we follow a king who did the ultimate thing that didn't appear to be working in the ultimate way when He died.

Jesus planted his kingdom by dying.

Which is a totally upside down version of the world's kingdoms.

In the world, the way to go up the ladder is by fighting hard, seizing power, slamming your enemies.

But for Jesus, the way up was down. The way to influence, the way to power - was to serve, not to run after influence and power.

There's a clear contrast between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of men, and it's the same as the contrast between religion and the gospel.

In religion - the way up is to work hard: do good, try harder, and then you get to go to heaven.

But in the Gospel - the way up is down - by admitting you're a sinner, a failure, then you can trust in Christ and his salvation and truly find your way up.

Scriptures Referenced:

Luke 2:1-5

Luke 2:6-7

Micah 5:2

Proverbs 21:1

Proverbs 16:1
Proverbs 16:33
Hebrews 11:1
Luke 2:8-11
Luke 2:12-14
Luke 2:15-20
Luke 5:27-32
Luke 23:32-38
Luke 22:24-27
Romans 12:10
Philippians 2:3
Luke 9:23-24
Luke 14:8-11

Questions for Discussion in Small Groups:

- 1) Contrast the rule of Jesus with the rulers in the political sphere. How is Jesus's rule unique?
- 2) How does Jesus's humility and service affect how we live?
- 3) Where do you often try to "reign" in a worldly way - at home? At work? Through politics?
- 4) What are the implications of this sermon for those Christians who possess power (at home, work, in politics?)
- 5) When do we get the reward of serving others?