

Week 1 Advent Series: The Joy of Christmas

November 29, 2025

Opening Monologue

Welcome to the AVC App, everyone! This is the Sermon and Commentary portion of the app. As you scroll down, you'll receive spiritual insights and commentary connected to this week's sermon. Enjoy, and dive in so you can be better equipped in God's Word.

The year is flying by, and we all just finished stuffing our faces with the blessings of a Thanksgiving meal! Well, it's time to put all the Thanksgiving decorations away and get the Christmas décor rolling... yes, from Thanksgiving to Christmas—just that fast.

The season of Advent begins this Sunday, November 30th. I love what multiple scholars and theologians say about the season of Advent and what it truly means:

“Advent is the Church's joyful paradox: we wait for the coming of Jesus who has already come. We stand with the prophets, hearts aching for the Messiah's arrival, yet we stand also with the shepherds who have seen the Child and heard the angels sing. In this holy tension we rejoice: Christ is born, Bethlehem's manger has forever shattered the darkness, and because He has come once in humility, we now await with unshakable joy His coming again in glory. The world has already been turned upside down by a Baby's cry; soon it will be made completely new when the King returns. That is the quiet, radiant, unstoppable joy of Advent.”

Welcome to the Christmas season! This Sunday we begin a new Christmas series titled “The Joy of Christmas.” Be sure to join us as we celebrate our Lord and Savior's birth throughout this entire season.

“An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be

for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'" (Luke 2:9-12)

JESUS is the Joy of Christmas!

In Christ,
Rev. Brad Standfest

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Web: <https://www.almontvineyardchurch.org/media>

You Tube: <https://www.youtube.com/@almontvineyardchurch>

Key Sermon Texts

Isaiah 7:14

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah%207%3A14%20&version=NIV>

Isaiah 9: 6-7

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah%209%3A%206-7&version=NIV>

Micah 5:2

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Micah%205%3A2&version=NIV>

Luke 2: 1-12

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%202%3A%201-12&version=NIV>

The Real Joy of Christmas

If we went around the room and asked, "What is so joyous about Christmas?" we would hear a chorus of beautiful answers.

Someone would say, "It's family coming home."

Someone would smile and say, "It's the giving and receiving of gifts."

Another would chime in, "It's the fantastic cookies!"

And still another would declare, “It’s all about the food and fellowship.”

All of that is fine and dandy (wonderful, even). That is the jolly joy of Christmas, the warm, sentimental happiness that makes December sparkle. But as followers of Jesus, we must be careful not to let the hustle, bustle, and tinsel drown out the real Christmas story. Because the real joy of Christmas is not temporary; it is eternal. It carries eternal significance in the grand story of humanity.

You see, Christmas is not amazing; it is literally supernatural.

The eternal Son of God, the Word who was with God and was God, the One through whom and for whom all things were created (John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:16), did the unimaginable. He broke every law of nature we know. He stepped out of the glory of heaven, laid aside the independent exercise of His divine privileges (Philippians 2:6-7), and clothed Himself with humanity in the womb of a young woman from Nazareth. The Infinite became an infant. The One who holds the universe in His hands had tiny hands that could not yet grasp. The King of kings was born in a stable because there was no room in the inn.

For centuries, the prophets of God had been sounding the promise.

- “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14, NIV).
- “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given... And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6, NIV).
- Even David, looking forward in the Spirit, sang, “I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you’” (Psalm 2:7; cf. Psalm 22 and Psalm 110).

Hundreds of specific prophecies (over 300!) pointed to this moment: the tribe, the lineage, the town of Bethlehem, the virgin birth, the massacre of the innocents, the flight to Egypt, the return to Nazareth. God was writing history in advance.

Then, after Malachi’s final word, heaven went silent. Four hundred

years (no prophet, no fresh word, no open vision). The intertestamental period felt like an endless night. Empires rose and fell. God's people groaned under oppression. Many wondered, "Has God forgotten His promise?"

But God had not forgotten. He broke the silence not with thunder from Sinai, not with a warrior on a white horse, but with the faint, piercing cry of a newborn baby lying in a feeding trough. The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us (John 1:14). The Light shattered the darkness, and the darkness has never understood it nor overcome it (John 1:5).

Luke 2:1-12 tells us exactly who this Child is:

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So 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. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." (Luke 2:1-12)

Do you hear the announcement?

"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people."

Not some people. Not privileged people. Not religious people only. All

the people. The shepherds (the outcasts, the overlooked, the working-class nobodies) were the first to hear it. Heaven's royal birth announcement was delivered not to Caesar's palace, not to the temple elite in Jerusalem, but to smelly shepherds on a Judean hillside.

And what is this good news of great joy?

"Today... a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."

That is the real joy of Christmas.

- The joy that the guilt of sin can be removed forever because the Savior has come.
- The joy that death has lost its sting because the One born in Bethlehem is the Resurrection and the Life.
- The joy that loneliness is answered because Immanuel ("God with us") has arrived.
- The joy that broken relationship with God is restored because the Prince of Peace has been given.
- The joy that every Old Testament promise finds its "Yes" in this Child (2 Corinthians 1:20).
- The joy that history has a destination, because the King who came humbly the first time is coming again in glory (Revelation 22:20).

The angels could not contain themselves. Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:13-14).

Christmas joy is not rooted in presents under a tree; it is rooted in the Presence in the manger. It is not rooted in holiday feelings; it is rooted in historical fact (God became man).

It is not rooted in a season that ends December 26; it is rooted in an eternal Savior who reigns forever.

So enjoy the cookies. Cherish the family gatherings. Exchange the gifts. Light the candles. Sing the carols. But never forget: the real joy of Christmas is Jesus (the promised Messiah, the virgin-born Son, the Word made

**flesh, the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world,
the King who is coming again).**

He is the good news.

He is the great joy.

**He is the reason Bethlehem's manger still echoes through
eternity.**

**And that joy is for all the people (yesterday, today, and
forever).**

Merry Christmas, indeed.

Come, let us adore Him.

(1, Rev. Standfest)

Commentary on Main Scriptures

Prophetic Echoes: The Messiah's Arrival Foretold - A Biblical Reflection on Isaiah 7:14, Isaiah 9:6-7, and the Psalms

In the grand tapestry of Scripture, the Old Testament prophets and psalmists serve as divine heralds, their words weaving a thread of anticipation that culminates in the manger of Bethlehem. These prophecies are not mere historical footnotes or poetic flourishes; they are God's sovereign declarations, etched into eternity, pointing unerringly to the coming of His Son, Jesus Christ. As we reflect on the passages highlighted in our exploration of the real joy of Christmas—Isaiah 7:14, Isaiah 9:6-7, Psalm 2:7, and the messianic shadows in Psalms 22 and 110—we see a profound unity. They reveal a Savior who is both intimately human and infinitely divine, born to shatter darkness and establish an everlasting kingdom of peace.

Drawing from the Life Application Bible Commentary, these prophecies invite us not just to intellectual assent but to transformative application. They challenge us: In a world of fleeting joys—family gatherings, gifts, and feasts—how do we anchor our lives in the eternal joy of the Incarnation? Let us unpack these texts, merging their insights into a coherent reflection that illuminates the supernatural reality of Christmas.

Isaiah 7:14 - The Sign of Immanuel: God With Us in Our Fear

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14, NIV).

This verse emerges from a moment of national crisis in Judah’s history. King Ahaz, trembling under the threat of invading armies from Israel and Syria, refused God’s invitation to ask for a sign of deliverance (Isaiah 7:10-12). His response—pious on the surface but rooted in unbelief—exposed a heart that mocked divine assurance. Yet God, in His mercy, provided a sign anyway: a virgin birth, a child named Immanuel, meaning “God with us.” The Life Application Bible Commentary emphasizes the dual fulfillment here. In the near term, it pointed to a child born in Ahaz’s day (possibly Isaiah’s son, Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz in Isaiah 8:3), signaling the immediate defeat of Judah’s enemies within a few years. But the ultimate horizon stretches to the Messiah, the virgin-born Son who embodies God’s presence amid human turmoil.

What does this mean for us today? The commentary urges practical faith: Just as Ahaz’s fear led to alliance with Assyria (a disastrous choice that invited greater oppression), our anxieties often drive us to self-reliant “saviors”—career ambitions, relationships, or holiday distractions—rather than trusting God’s nearness. Immanuel’s arrival declares that God doesn’t merely watch from afar; He enters our mess. Jesus, conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary’s womb (Matthew 1:18-23), bridges the chasm sin created. In the Christmas season, when loneliness or loss amplifies the “why have You forsaken me?” cries (echoing Psalm 22:1), this prophecy applies: God is with you. Not as a distant emperor, but as a vulnerable infant in a feeding trough. Application? When fear grips—be it global unrest or personal grief—pause the hustle. Meditate on Matthew 1:23. Let Immanuel’s presence calm your heart, turning seasonal stress into sacred trust. As the commentary notes, “God’s signs are given not to satisfy curiosity but to strengthen faith.” Claim it: God with us means no enemy, no circumstance, no silent night is beyond His reach.

Isaiah 9:6-7 - The Child Who Is Wonderful: Authority and Peace Restored

“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. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this” (Isaiah 9:6-7).

Shifting from Isaiah 7’s immediate peril, chapter 9 bursts with prophetic light piercing Galilee’s gloom (Isaiah 9:1-2), a region later blessed by Jesus’ ministry. The Life Application Bible Commentary highlights the poetic genius here: a child’s birth announced with royal pomp, yet the titles reveal divine majesty. “Wonderful Counselor” speaks of supernatural wisdom, far beyond human advisors—think of Ahaz’s folly contrasted with Christ’s perfect guidance (John 14:26). “Mighty God” affirms deity in diapers, the Creator cradled by Mary. “Everlasting Father” evokes tender provision, not aloof authority, while “Prince of Peace” promises shalom—a wholeness that heals fractured lives and nations.

The commentary merges these into a call for joyful submission: This isn’t abstract theology; it’s actionable hope. In Ahaz’s day, unfaithful kings like him eroded trust in leadership, mirroring our world’s corrupt powers and personal “thrones” of control. But Jesus’ shoulder-borne government—fulfilled in His humble birth and ultimate reign (Revelation 19:16)—invites us to offload our burdens (Matthew 11:28-30). Verse 7’s “no end” underscores eternity: Christmas joy isn’t confined to December; it’s the foretaste of a kingdom where justice flows like a river (Amos 5:24). Zeal—God’s passionate commitment—guarantees it, not our efforts.

For application in this Advent season: Amid the “jolly joy” of cookies and carols, reclaim Christ’s counsel. When decisions loom (family conflicts, financial strains), consult the Wonderful Counselor through prayer and Scripture. Embrace Him as Mighty God in weakness, Everlasting Father in isolation, Prince of Peace in chaos. As the commentary applies, “We can rest confident that God manages the world well.” Let this prophecy fuel unshakable joy: The Child’s cry in Bethlehem echoes in Revelation’s throne room, where every knee bows (Philippians 2:10-11). Your life, submitted to His reign, becomes a

microcosm of that endless peace.

Psalm 2:7 - The Son's Decree: Eternal Sonship and Universal Rule

“I will proclaim the Lord’s decree: He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have become your father’” (Psalm 2:7).

This royal psalm thunders against nations raging in futile rebellion (Psalm 2:1-3), God’s laughter from heaven underscoring His sovereignty (v. 4). The king’s coronation—David’s, yet transcending him—declares divine sonship, a relational intimacy empowering rule over the earth’s ends (v. 8). The Life Application Bible Commentary views this as quintessentially messianic: David’s enthronement foreshadows the greater Son, Jesus, begotten not in creation but in exaltation—His resurrection and ascension (Acts 13:33; Hebrews 1:5). “Today” marks the decisive moment of vindication, echoing the empty tomb’s triumph.

Merging with our Christmas theme, this prophecy applies sonship’s joy to us. The nations’ plot mirrors our culture’s dismissal of Christ—relegating Him to holiday nostalgia. Yet God installs His King on Zion (v. 6), and the Son’s authority crushes opposition (v. 9). For believers, it’s a call to “kiss the Son” (v. 12)—affectionate allegiance yielding refuge and blessing. In application: Christmas consumerism often rages like the nations, idolizing stuff over the Savior. Counter it by proclaiming the decree: Jesus is God’s Son, your Brother (Romans 8:15). Share this joy boldly—perhaps over Thanksgiving leftovers—with family or strangers. As the commentary notes, “Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (v. 12). In a divided world, embody the Son’s rule through forgiveness and witness, anticipating the day when every rebel bows in worship.

Psalms 22 and 110: Shadows of Suffering and Kingship - The Cross and the Crown

The Psalms deepen this prophetic chorus. Psalm 22, the “Crucifixion Psalm,” opens with Christ’s cry from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (v. 1; Matthew 27:46). David

may have penned it from personal anguish, but the Life Application Bible Commentary insists its vivid details—mocking crowds (v. 7-8; Matthew 27:39-43), pierced hands and feet (v. 16), divided garments (v. 18; John 19:23-24)—prophecy Calvary a millennium in advance. Yet it pivots to victory: “He has done it!” (v. 31), fulfilled in “It is finished!” (John 19:30). Application? Suffering isn’t senseless; it’s redemptive. Christmas’ joy emerges from the cross’s shadow—Jesus’ abandonment secured our adoption. When trials pierce, cling to verses 24-25: God hasn’t despised the afflicted; He answers. Share this hope: Your pain, like Christ’s, testifies to resurrection life.

Psalm 110 crowns the reflection: “The Lord says to my lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet’” (v. 1; echoed in Hebrews 1:13). Davidic, yet messianic—Jesus Himself unpacked it as proof of His divinity (Matthew 22:41-46). The commentary highlights the dual office: eternal priest “in the order of Melchizedek” (v. 4; Hebrews 7:17), interceding flawlessly, and conquering king (v. 5-7). No Davidic heir fulfilled this; only Christ, exalted post-resurrection (Acts 2:34-35).

Together, these psalms apply the full gospel: Suffering Servant becomes Victorious Sovereign. Christmas anticipates Easter—the babe’s coos prelude the King’s command. In hustle’s bustle, serve as priests (prayer) and kings (justice). As the commentary applies, “We can count on God’s faithfulness... Trust in the baby born of a virgin... because the Lord is with him.”

The Eternal Joy: From Prophecy to Presence

These prophecies converge in Luke 2’s angelic chorus: “A Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord” (v. 11). The virgin’s Child, Wonderful Counselor, begotten Son, pierced Sufferer, and enthroned Priest-King breaks heaven’s silence with a baby’s wail. The Life Application Bible Commentary weaves them into one exhortation: Amid “jolly joys,” anchor in the real—the supernatural story where God invades time to redeem rebels.

This Christmas, let these words transform: Fear not; Immanuel dwells. Yield to the government’s shoulder. Kiss the Son for refuge. From

forsaken cry to finished work, rejoice—He has come, and He is coming. The prophets ached for this; the shepherds witnessed it. Now, we live it. May unshakable joy flood your soul, echoing the heavenly host: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14). Christ is born—your Savior reigns. Hallelujah!

New Testament Fulfillments of the Christmas Prophecies

(A Life Application Reflection)

1. Isaiah 7:14 → Matthew 1:18-23

The Virgin Birth and “Immanuel”

Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14 directly: “The virgin will conceive and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (Matt 1:23).

The Life Application Commentary stresses that Matthew is not doing a clever word-play; he is declaring the ultimate, once-for-all fulfillment. Mary’s pregnancy was not a scandal to be hushed up—it was the sign God had promised 700 years earlier. Joseph’s fear, the village gossip, and the social shame all dissolved in the angel’s explanation: “what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

Application: When obedience to God looks like it will cost you your reputation, remember Joseph. God turns apparent disgrace into the greatest honor in history. Immanuel is still “God with us” in every situation that feels impossible.

2. Isaiah 9:6-7 → Luke 1:31-33; John 1:1-14; Revelation 19:11-16

The Child Who Bears the Government

- “A child is born” (humanity) → Luke 2:7, the baby wrapped in cloths.
- “A Son is given” (deity) → John 3:16; Galatians 4:4.
- “Wonderful Counselor” → John 14:26; 16:13 (the Spirit He sends).
- “Mighty God” → John 1:1, 14; Colossians 2:9; Hebrews 1:3.
- “Everlasting Father” → John 14:9 (“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father”).
- “Prince of Peace” → Romans 5:1; Ephesians 2:14; and ultimately Revelation 21-22.
- “Government on his shoulders... of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end” → Luke 1:32-33 (Gabriel to Mary);

Philippians 2:9–11; Revelation 11:15.

Life Application Commentary note: The same Jesus who had no place to lay His infant head now has the government of the entire universe resting securely on His shoulder. Every earthly authority that seems so overwhelming today will one day be placed under His feet. Christmas is the coronation in disguise.

3. Micah 5:2 → Matthew 2:1-6; John 7:42

Born in Bethlehem

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah... out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

Even Herod’s own scholars knew the text. Caesar’s census became the divine taxi service that moved a pregnant teenager 90 miles to the exact village God had named centuries before.

Application: God is still orchestrating the mundane details of life (taxes, travel, closed doors) to fulfill His ancient promises. Nothing is random when you belong to Him.

4. Psalm 2:7 → Matthew 3:17; Acts 13:33; Hebrews 1:5; 5:5

“You are my Son; today I have begotten you”

The Father declared this at Jesus’ baptism (“This is my Son, whom I love”) and again at the resurrection (Acts 13:33). The eternal Son who always was now enters human history in a decisive new way at the incarnation.

Application: Because He is the beloved Son, and because we are in Him, the Father says the same over every believer: “You are my son, you are my daughter, whom I love.” Christmas means we are brought into the family circle of the Trinity.

5. Psalm 22 → The Entire Passion Narrative

The Life Application Commentary lists more than a dozen precise fulfillments.

- v. 1 → “My God, my God, why...?” (Matt 27:46)
- v. 7 → Mocking and head-wagging (Matt 27:39)
- v. 8 → “He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue him” (Matt 27:43)
- v. 16 → Pierced hands and feet (John 20:25–27)

- v. 18 → Soldiers gambling for His clothes (John 19:23-24)

Yet the psalm ends in triumph (vv. 25-31), exactly as the resurrection and Great Commission do.

Application: The manger and the cross are inseparable. The wood of the feeding trough foreshadows the wood of the cross. The joy of Christmas is made possible only because the Babe was born to die in our place.

6. Psalm 110:1, 4 → Matthew 22:41-46; Mark 16:19; Hebrews 1:3, 13; 5:6; 7:17-25

The Lord at the Right Hand and Priest Forever

Jesus Himself used Psalm 110 to silence the Pharisees. After His resurrection He “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (Heb 1:3), and He lives as our eternal priest “in the order of Melchizedek.”

Application: Because Jesus is seated (His atoning work is finished) and because He ever lives to intercede (Heb 7:25), you can come boldly to the throne of grace at any moment—especially in this busy, stressful season.

The Bottom Line of All the Fulfillments

Every Old Testament whisper finds its thunderous “Yes!” in the infant cry at Bethlehem.

- The virgin conceived → Immanuel has come.
- The Child was born → Mighty God is here.
- The Son was given → The government now rests on His shoulders.
- The Son was declared → We are adopted into the Father’s family.
- The Sufferer was pierced → Our sins are paid for.
- The Priest-King is enthroned → He prays for us and is coming back to reign.

That is the real, unshakable, eternal joy of Christmas.

Not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son (1 John 4:10).

Not that we found a way to heaven, but that heaven came down to find us.

This Christmas, let every light on the tree, every carol, every

gift, every family hug point you back to the manger—and through the manger to the cross, the empty tomb, and the throne.

He came the first time as a Baby.

He is coming again as King.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Luke 2

JESUS IS BORN IN BETHLEHEM / 2:1-12

As a historian, Luke identified the time period of Jesus' birth by naming the Roman emperor and the local governor. The contrast between Jesus, the divine King of kings, and Augustus, the first Roman emperor, would have been striking to Luke's first readers. Octavian, who had been renamed Augustus (meaning "reverend") by the Roman Senate, was the first Roman emperor, ruling all of the vast Roman Empire under his sole authority. The month of August was named after him—to honor him. In contrast, Jesus was born into humble circumstances, even having a livestock's trough as his cradle. Jesus, the beloved Son of God, did not shrink from coming to this earth to the most modest of circumstances. Augustus is the emperor who began the worldwide Pax Romana (Roman Peace), but only Jesus brings true peace with God. Jesus did not come as a conquering king but as a servant; and he calls people to follow him, in denying themselves and finding ways to serve others (9:23-27; 22:25-30; Philippians 2:5-11).

2:1-3 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) Luke is the only Gospel writer who related the events he recorded to world history. His account was addressed to a predominantly Greek audience that would have been interested in and familiar with the political situation. The Romans ruled Palestine; Emperor Caesar Augustus, the first Roman emperor, was one of the greatest of all Roman rulers. He was a good administrator and was fastidious about the financial accounting of his empire. Augustus ended the civil war in the land and brought peace and prosperity

throughout the Empire. He reigned from 27 b.c. to a.d. 14. The Roman rulers, considered to be like gods, contrasted greatly with the tiny baby in a manger who truly was God in the flesh.

A Roman census (registration) was taken to aid military conscription or tax collection. The Jews didn't have to serve in the Roman army, but they could not avoid paying taxes. Augustus's decree went out in God's perfect timing and according to God's perfect plan to bring his Son into the world. No one had a choice about participating in the census. Thus all went to their own towns to be registered.

There has been much debate over the facts presented by Luke in chapter 2. There are four key issues:

1. Did Augustus order an empirewide census during the time that Luke reports?
2. Why did Joseph go to Bethlehem since a Roman census did not require people to go to their hometowns?
3. Why did Mary have to go with Joseph?
4. How do we date this particular census with the birth of Jesus because there is no record of a census during the days of Quirinius until a.d. 6?

The questions will be answered in order. First, did Augustus order an empire-wide census during the time that Luke reports? There is no record of a single empire-wide census by Augustus (who ruled from 27 b.c. to a.d. 14). However, there was an empire-wide policy for periodic census-taking and the resultant taxation. Luke was probably reflecting Augustus's policy as it was acted out regionally.

Second, why did Joseph go to Bethlehem since a Roman census did not require people to go to their hometowns? The normal Roman procedure only required subjects to register where they were living. However, Roman policy often allowed exceptions for local practices. Traditional Jewish practice required registering in one's place of birth. So Joseph went to Bethlehem.

Third, why did Mary have to go with Joseph? Normally the Romans did not require women to be part of the poll tax as was the policy in Egypt, but they probably required women to be accounted for in the Syrian region. It could also be possible that Mary and Joseph

desired to be together since they both knew the special significance of this baby's birth.

Finally, how do we date this particular census with the birth of Jesus because there is no record of a census during the days of Quirinius until a.d. 6? In a.d. 6, when Quirinius became governor, Syria annexed Judea to itself as part of the Roman province. A very unpopular census was taken as recorded by Josephus and mentioned in Acts 5:37. Quirinius is nowhere listed as governor during the time of Herod, who died in 4 b.c. It may be possible, however, that Quirinius was the administrator of this census before he officially became governor. Censuses took time to complete, and the actual taxation could have come much later.

WHO'S IN CHARGE?

The Romans ruled the civilized world at this time. By contrast, Joseph controlled very little. Against his better judgment and political convictions he complied with the Roman order and traveled with Mary to Bethlehem. Often people feel like Joseph, caught by forces larger than they are.

The Romans were in control insofar as human authority can get its way by exerting human power. But the Romans did not recognize their limitations. In reality, God controls the world. In all times and places, he works his will. God did not write Roman law, but judged it. God did not soften Joseph's bumpy road, but strengthened him. God is in charge of your life too. He will guide you and provide all you need. Like Joseph, live each day by faith, trusting that God is in charge.

2:4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. Certainly Joseph would not have chosen to travel either with or without his pregnant wife just as she was ready to deliver, but he had no choice. Rome was far too powerful for anyone to resist. Most Jews hated taking part in a census because they viewed it as sacrilegious. God alone was to number his people. When David attempted to number Israel, he brought great calamity on the nation because of his rash decision (2 Samuel 24; 1 Chronicles 21). So Joseph had two reasons to be angry about the census. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, a journey of

about seventy or eighty miles (see map). In the Old Testament, the “city of David” generally referred to Jeru-salem (2 Samuel 5:7, 9), but Bethlehem was where David grew up (1 Samuel 16; 17:12; 20:6).

God controls all history. By the decree of Emperor Augustus, Jesus was born in the very town prophesied for his birth (Micah 5:2), even though his parents did not live there. Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem because Joseph was descended from the house and family of David. In fact, both Joseph and Mary were descendants of David. Old Testament prophets predicted often that the Messiah would be born in David’s royal line (see, for example, Isaiah 11:1; Jeremiah 33:15; Ezekiel 37:24; Hosea 3:5).

2:5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. Luke does not explain why Mary made this difficult trip with Joseph. Some suggest that she was needed for the census—unlike the policy in Egypt, women in Syria were subject to the poll tax. Certainly Joseph did not want to leave Mary alone. She probably had already faced painful gossip because of her premarriage pregnancy and preferred to stay with Joseph. Or perhaps they simply both saw the outworkings of God’s plan and traveled to Bethlehem where the promised child was to be born (Micah 5:2). At this point, Joseph and Mary were engaged. The two were living together, but they abstained from sexual relations. Matthew 1:24–25 explains that an angel spoke to Joseph in a dream about Mary’s condition: “When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus” (nrsv).

COMFORT ZONES

The government forced Joseph to make a long trip just to pay his taxes. His fianc,e, who had to go with him, was going to have a baby any moment. But when they arrived in Bethlehem, they couldn’t even find a place to stay. Doing God’s will often takes people out of their comfort zones. Jesus’ life began in poverty. Later, Jesus would stress to his disciples what it meant to have no place to lay one’s head (9:58). Those who do God’s will are not guaranteed comfortable lives. But they are promised that everything, even their discomfort, has meaning in God’s plan.

2:6-7 So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

In simple, direct language, Luke presented the Christmas story: no trees or lights, just a manger and animals and a too-crowded inn. It isn't surprising that there was no room for them in the inn considering the number of travelers flocking to various cities during the time of this census.

At some time during their visit in Bethlehem, the days were completed and the promised child was born. Of course, he was her firstborn Son—Mary had had no previous children (indeed, she was a virgin), and the angel had promised that the child would be “Son of the Most High” (1:32). Mary wrapped the baby in swaddling cloths, bands of cloth that were used to keep a baby warm and give it a sense of security. These cloths were believed to protect its internal organs. This custom of wrapping infants is still practiced in many Mideastern countries. Apparently Mary and Joseph accomplished the delivery themselves; otherwise, a midwife would have wrapped the child.

After the birth and after the child had been cleaned and wrapped, Mary laid Him in a manger, an animal's feeding trough. She may have filled the manger with hay to make a soft bed. This mention of the manger is the basis for the traditional belief that Jesus was born in a stable. Stables were often caves with feeding troughs (mangers) carved into the rock walls. Despite popular Christmas card pictures, the surroundings were dark and dirty. Everything pointed to obscurity, poverty, and even rejection. Luke showed the King of kings born into poor and humble circumstances—born as a human, born to serve.

“The twist in the story is, of course, that it is the very pagan authorities who are responsible for bringing Jesus to Bethlehem. Caesar, like Cyrus before him, unknowingly becomes the servant of God's purpose. The promise is fulfilled through the actions of the unlikeliest of people. For God is Lord of all the earth and there is no power not under his authority, no poverty to which he turns a blind eye of indifference.””

June Osborne

Resources: Rev. Brad Standfest, (1) Logos Bible Program, Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, Guzik, David, Life Application Bible Commentary, Factbook Logos bible, Barton, Bruce B., and Philip Wesley Comfort. 1995 Barton, Bruce B., David Veerman, Linda Chaffee Taylor, and Grant R. Osborne. 1997. Luke. Life Application Bible Commentary. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers

Sermon Notes: The Joy of Christmas

First Sunday of Advent

Good Morning Everyone... I hope you all had a Wonderful Thanksgiving...

Well... I hate to rush you but put all of the Thanksgiving Day decorations away... The march towards Christmas Day has begun...

On the Traditional Church Calendar today marks the First Day of Advent...

I titled our Christmas series: The Joy of Christmas

Before we dive in, real quick—AVC connections: YouTube, App, Facebook / Website

Let's pray.

What is Advent? Here's a short summary from scholars and theologians across the centuries:

"Advent is the Church's joyful paradox: we wait for the coming of Jesus who has already come. We stand with the prophets, hearts aching for the Messiah's arrival, yet we stand also with the shepherds who have seen the Child and heard the angels sing. In this holy tension we rejoice: Christ is born, Bethlehem's manger has forever shattered the darkness, and because He has come once in humility, we now await with unshakable joy His coming again in glory. The world has already been turned upside down by a Baby's cry; soon it will be made completely new when the King returns. That is the quiet, radiant, unstoppable joy of Advent."

If I went around the room and asked, "What's so joyous about Christmas?" we'd all say different things...

- Family coming home!
- Giving & receiving gifts
- All the food & fellowship

All of that is fine... but for the Christian it goes so much deeper. We must not lose the real Christmas story in all the hustle and bustle. Christmas is eternal, not temporary.

What's eternal about it?

It's about a God who dwells in the heavens... a God who loves His children so much He did the unimaginable... He humbled Himself, was born of a mother, took on flesh, and walked among us.

The Christmas story is more than amazing. Only one word fits: Supernatural.

The prophets talked about it all through the Old Testament... A Messiah is coming... A Savior is on the way... He's coming...

Isaiah 7:14: Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

Isaiah 9:6-7: 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. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

Micah 5:2: "But you, Bethlehem, 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."

Malachi 3:1: "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me..."

Then—after Malachi—400 years of silence.

Can you imagine being told all your life "Christmas is coming" and it never arrives? But God's Word does not return void. One night He broke the silence—not with thunder, but with the cry of a Baby in a manger in a dirty, stinky barn.

Let's read Luke 2:1-12

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So 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. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Friends, the joy of Christmas is right there in the angel's voice: "I bring you good news of great joy... A Savior has been born..."

And that Savior's name is Jesus—spelled J-E-S-U-S—because Jesus means "The Lord saves."

That's the joy of Christmas. - Amen.

Closing prayer

Devotional Questions & Reflections

"The Real Joy of Christmas." Devotional Questions & Applications. Please read the scriptures and questions below and engage in them. May the Joy of Jesus fill your hearts!

1. Luke 2:10-11 - "I bring you good news that will cause great joy..."

Today... a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.” The angel says this joy is “for all the people.” What are some ways this Christmas season that the “jolly joys” (presents, parties, traditions) have crowded out the “great joy” of a Savior who was born specifically for you? What is one practical step you can take this week to make the Savior the center of your celebration?

2. Isaiah 7:14 & Matthew 1:18-23 - Immanuel, “God with us.”

Joseph faced fear, confusion, and potential shame, yet God was literally with him in the mess. Where in your life right now do you need to experience “Immanuel”? How does remembering that the same God who moved into a womb and a manger is still with you change the way you face that situation?

3. Isaiah 9:6 - “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given... Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Which of these four names of Jesus do you personally need the most this Christmas, and why? Spend time thanking Him for being exactly who you need, and ask Him to reveal that aspect of His character to you in a fresh way this season.

4. Psalm 2:7 & Matthew 3:17 - “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

Because Jesus is the beloved Son, everyone who trusts in Him is brought into the Father’s family and hears the same words spoken over them. When you feel unlovable, forgotten, or like a failure, how does it affect you to remember that the Father’s delight in you is rooted in what Jesus did, not in your performance?

5. Micah 5:2 & Luke 2:1-7 - Bethlehem, the census, the manger.

God used a pagan emperor’s tax decree to get Mary and Joseph to the exact village He had prophesied centuries earlier. Think back over the last year: can you identify one “inconvenient” or painful circumstance that God actually used to position you exactly where He wanted you? How does that grow your trust in His sovereignty this Christmas?

6. Psalm 22 & Luke 2:7 - The baby in the feeding trough

and the Man on the cross.

The same hands that Mary wrapped in cloths would one day be pierced with nails. The joy of the manger is inseparable from the sorrow of the cross—and the triumph of the empty tomb. How does holding these two realities together deepen your worship this year? Is there any sin or guilt you're still carrying that you need to lay at the foot of that manger-cross?

7. Psalm 110:1, Hebrews 7:25 & Luke 2:11 - He is born “the Messiah, the Lord,” now seated at the right hand of the Father, forever interceding.

The Baby we celebrate is currently praying for you by name. What is one burden, decision, or person you can bring to Him right now, confident that the One who once had no place to lay His head now rules the universe and lives to intercede for you?