

MARY AND JOSEPH: THE ROAD WHERE GOD LEADS

December 07, 2014

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Luke 2:1-7

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SERMON SERIES: "CHRISTMAS ROADS

SERMON TITLE: "MARY & JOSEPH: THE ROAD WHERE GOD LEADS"

SCRIPTURE TEXTS: LUKE 2:1-7) (P. 857)

TOPIC: CHRISTMAS / ADVENT

DATE: DECEMBER 7, 2014

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INTRO.

-- During this advent season we are converting our sanctuary into a combination RV and time machine and traveling back to the first century Israel to the roads that lead to Bethlehem, where we will meet those who are a part of the Christmas story.

Today, we meet a couple on that road who are central figures in the Christmas story - Mary and Joseph. What we are going to see is that as they are traveling that road they are traveling the road of God's providence, and as we look at Luke's account of Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem, we will gain rich insights into that providence - into what it is and how it works, not only in the lives of Mary and Joseph but also in ours.

Luke 2:1-7

I. The Christmas story is rooted in history.

A. The Christmas story is not a myth.

1. Every year the American Atheists organization engages in an anti-Christmas ad campaign.

This year's billboard shows a little girl writing this letter to Santa: "Dear Santa, All I want for Christmas is to skip church! I'm too old for fairy tales."

Actually, that ad should upset the folks at Disney more than Christians because if a child that age is too old for fairy tales, then Disney world would go out of business. Plus, Luke's account here makes it abundantly clear that the Christmas story is not a myth or fairy tale. Luke doesn't start his account by saying "Once upon a time" but with the words "In those days" (v. 1a). What Luke is saying to us is that the Christmas story is time-and-space history.

Luke carefully establishes the historical context in which Jesus' birth occurred. It was in the time of the Roman Empire and the reign of Caesar Augustus and during a census registration decreed by Augustus in preparation to impose taxes on the conquered inhabitants of the Empire. Luke further ties down the historical setting by stating that this was the taxation made during Quirinius' first stint as governor of the province of Syria.

B. The Registration Requirement

-- Luke also tells us that the registration for this taxation required people to register in their "own town," probably meaning their ancestral town. Since Joseph was a descendant of David, that ancestral town was Bethlehem. The registration also occurred while Joseph was still "betrothed" to Mary, meaning that they were legally bound together as husband and wife but not yet living together. Luke tells us this to remind us that Mary is not pregnant from Joseph but from the supernatural activity of the Holy Spirit. Although Mary's pregnancy is advanced, she accompanies Joseph on the 60-mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It would have been a difficult journey for a woman in her final days of pregnancy, probably taking three days, but Mary goes along because they don't want to be separated when she gives birth to her son.

II. The Christmas story is a story of God's providence.

A. A Story Orchestrated by Sovereign Providence

-- The account that Luke gives in the first seven verses describes the Christmas story by just summarizing the historical facts, but Luke wants us to know that this history has been carefully orchestrated by God's sovereign providence. Starting in verse 8, Luke pulls back the curtain to show us a glimpse into the supernatural activity of God in the Christmas story.

Cf., vv, 8-14

B. A Journey of Providence

-- Mary & Joseph's journey to Bethlehem was rooted in real history and it was also a journey of providence.

1. Definition

-- The word "providence" refers to God's governing of His creation. Providence is God's directing His creation (including people and events) to fulfill His purposes.

2. The Centerpiece of Providence

a. The centerpiece of God's providence is the Christmas event. God's great purpose in this world is our redemption. He is directing all of human history to that end - to delivering us from condemnation because of our sin and to bring us to salvation in Christ.

Cf., **Ephesians 1:3-5** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, **4** even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love **5** he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will

b. The focus of God's plan for our salvation that was purposed in eternity past is the Incarnation, the coming of God the Son in human flesh. Paul writes about that event in Galatians 4.

Galatians 4:4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman

-- The word Paul uses for time is the Greek *chronos*, which emphasizes time as a sequence of history. God had been sovereignly and providentially preparing for the fulfillment of His eternal plan throughout the millennia of human history. Then as Mary and Joseph made their journey to Bethlehem, Paul says that "the time had fully come." Not only had Mary's pregnancy reached full term; history itself was fully pregnant and ready to give birth.

3. The 2 Scales of Providence

-- In the Christmas story we see God's providence operating on both large and small scales, directing both nations and individuals.

a. Large Scale: God Governs Nations. (vv. 1-3)

(1) God is sovereign over and directs the affairs of nations and empires.

Psalms 22:28 For kingship belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations.

Daniel 2:20-21a Daniel answered and said: "Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. **21** He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings

(2) We see the large scale of God God's governing nations in verses 1-3 of today's text.

vv. 1-3

-- God had used the Greek and Roman empires to make His final preparations for the birth of Jesus. 350 years before Jesus' birth Alexander the Great rose to power in Greece, and in the astounding span of just 12 years he had conquered the entire known world, from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates. Everywhere Alexander went he spread Greek culture, especially its language. Greek became the lingua franca, the official language spoken throughout the empire. All educated people, regardless of nationality, could read, speak and write Greek.

The vast empire of Alexander eventually gave way to an even greater empire, the unparalleled Roman Empire. The Romans, however, were enchanted by the Greek culture and maintained Greek as its official language. If Greece was the empire of the arts, then Rome was the empire of engineering. The Romans built a network of roads throughout the empire. Roman roads and security meant that ordinary people, could do something never before possible: travel safely and relatively quickly from one region to another, making possible, for example, Paul's missionary journeys.

-- I believe that we even see the providential hand of God at work in Caesar's decree for a census or registration of the peoples throughout the empire, probably in preparation for a new taxation campaign (does that mean that God was behind the idea of imposing taxes?).

b. Small Scale: God Governs Individuals. (vv. 4-7)

(1) God's providence also operates on the comparatively small scale of directing the lives of individuals.

Proverbs 16:9 The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.

(2) While God had been directing the affairs of empires like the Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans, He was also directing the lives of individuals, such as Joseph's ancestors. Joseph has to travel to Bethlehem because that is where his ancestors had originally lived, but somewhere along the way God had led one of Joseph's ancestors to move from Bethlehem and go north to live in Nazareth. If that had never happened, Joseph would have never met Mary.

III. The Insights

-- There are three important insights about God's providence that I want us to draw from this account of the Christmas story.

A. First, God's providence governs every aspect of our lives.

-- **Psalm 139:15-16** My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. **16** Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.

-- Something that we learn from Mary and Joseph is that God's providence may involve times of difficulty. The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem wasn't easy for Mary and Joseph. It was a journey that probably required at least three days of travel by walking or riding on a donkey (or perhaps in a cart drawn by a donkey, none of which was easy for a woman nearing the end of her pregnancy. Think how disappointed they must have been when they finally arrived in Bethlehem with Mary having contractions and labor pains and discovered that there was no place for them to stay. But all of this was part of God's providential directing.

B. Second, the providence that leads you will also provide for you..

-- Wherever God's providence may lead you God's presence will also sustain you.

Psalm 23:1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

-- It was a difficult journey for Mary and Joseph, but the Lord was with them, and He brought them safely to Bethlehem and saw Mary safely through her labor and delivery.

C. Third, God's providence cannot be defeated..

-- **Isaiah 14:24** The LORD of hosts has sworn: "As I have planned, so shall it be, and as I have purposed, so shall it stand,

-- God's providence cannot be thwarted. He will carry out His plan and accomplish His purposes. We see that powerfully displayed in the Christmas story. God first announced His intention to send His Son to be our Savior in Genesis 3, right after Adam and Eve's rebellion in the Garden.

Genesis 3:15 I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.

Throughout the OT Satan tried to oppose God's plan and keep Him from carrying it out. From time to time Satan would appear to win a battle, but there was never any question that he would lose the war.

Romans 8:28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose

God's providential love and power are so great that He can bring good to us even in the worst of times and circumstances.