

Series: **Christmas 2023**  
Today's Title: ***"The Birth of Jesus"***

December 24, 2023 – *Luke 2:1-7 and other selected passages*

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**Objective:** To encourage everyone in the spiritual immensity and simplicity of Jesus' birth.

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### ***Opening Prayer***

I really enjoy Christmas.

I pretty much enjoy all the holidays we celebrate in our culture, but Christmas has so many layers and so much meaning and warmth.

### **Was Jesus born on December 25?**

Probably not.

We really don't know the date of Jesus' birth.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, December 25<sup>th</sup> was established by the Bishop of Rome as the day the Church would celebrate the birth of Christ.

This date was chosen – in large part – due to the pagan holiday of '*Saturnalia*' – named after Saturn, the Roman god of agriculture – which was celebrated in December.

The motivation behind the Church choosing this date was to sanctify the pagan celebrations – to Christianize them.

Winter festivals were common in the ancient world.

***In the barbaric northlands, the Norsemen*** held a winter festival which they called 'Yule' – which our term 'yule-log' is derived from.

***In Persia*** fires were kindled to the god Mithras – in anticipation of the end of winter.

***In England, the Druids*** gathered Mistletoe – which they believed to be sacred – and they would hang from the ceiling or door frame, believing that when people walked under it, you would have to embrace them – helping people to reconcile.

***The German Monk***, Father of the Reformation, Martin Luther, is believed to have started the tradition of bringing a tree inside – and putting candles on it. He did this to symbolize the starry skies the shepherds saw the night Christ was born.

***St. Nicholas*** – a real person who lived in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century. He was the bishop of Myra (SW Turkey) – was known for his care for and generosity toward children. He was imprisoned and likely tortured during the persecution of Christians by the Roman emperor Diocletian but was released under the rule of Constantine the Great.

Many believe he attended the first Council of Nicaea (325).

***In Holland***, – St. Nicholas – tradition says in December he would leave gifts on the porches for good children, and switches for the parents of bad children.

***Caroling*** started in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

***Christmas cards*** were first printed in London in 1846 – by the owner of an art shop – Sir Henry Cole.

At about the same time – celebrating Christmas was accepted by churches in the United States and became a regular pattern of church life to this day.

**All that to say** – the various elements of our modern-day Christmas celebrations come from many different places and times, and the meaning behind many of these traditions has evolved from their original meaning, and they are now symbols which coincide with our modern Christmas celebrations.

But tonight, I want to focus our thoughts and attention on the event – the historical event that our Christmas holiday celebrates.

After all, the birth of Jesus is one of the most pivotal events in human history.

It was so pivotal that we calculate years based on time **B**efore **C**hrist – or After His birth – **AD** = *Anno Domini* = *in the year of our Lord*.

So, tonight...

- I want us to realize the spiritual immensity of this event in both divine and human history...
- And at the same time, I want us to realize the simplicity and normalcy of Jesus' birth.

**The spiritual immensity of the birth of Jesus.**

Christmas is about God becoming flesh.

God incarnate.

The condescension of God.

**Philippians 2:7-8** – *speaking of the 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the Triune God...Jesus*

“...but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men...”

### **Why did God do this?**

The answer takes us all the way back to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (**Genesis 1-2**), where we have a picture of God interacting with His creation without the pollution of sin.

Then, in **Genesis 3**, Scripture records the ‘Fall of Man’ – sin enters into humanity.

*At that point, everything changed* – the creation itself was altered due to the curse God placed on it.

The relationship between Adam and Eve and their offspring – and God – was hampered – limited.

The sin nature infected every person born – and as a result, people were enemies of God – resisting Him at every turn, in favor of their own desires and plans.

This massive fissure – this relationship dysfunction between God and Man was only repairable by God. Only God could fix the problem.

**The fix:** God would become one of us.

He would become a man – to reveal God to us – and to reconcile us to Himself.

He would become the Savior of all humanity – by giving His life as a sacrifice for all sin.

***This is the spiritual immensity of Christmas – from the divine perspective.***

Peter, in speaking about the salvation God would bring to the world, tells us these are “things into which angels long to look.” (1 Peter 1:12)

In **Ephesians 1:4-5**, Paul tells us the plan of salvation – which began in human history with the birth of Jesus – was a plan God formulated “...before the foundation of the world”.

“...even as He (God) chose us in Him (Jesus) before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him.

In love He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will...”

In **Matthew** and **Luke**, we have the narrative of the birth. However, in other passages in the N.T., the full identity and nature of the baby are revealed.

***These passages speak to the spiritual immensity of the birth we celebrate at Christmas.***

**Colossians 1:15-20** – *substitute pronouns with ‘baby’*

“He (This baby) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

For by Him (this baby) all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers

or authorities--all things were created through Him (this baby) and for Him (this baby).

And He (this baby) is before all things, and in Him (this baby) all things hold together.

And He (this baby) is the head of the body, the church. He (This baby) is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything He (this baby) might be preeminent.

For in Him (this baby) all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him (this baby) to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His (this baby's) cross.”

vs. 15 - “firstborn” – not a reference to time or birth order.

Greek: *prototokos* – pre-eminent, the supreme one – the ultimate one – out-ranks all others.

#### **Colossians 2:9**

“For in Him (this baby) the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily...”

In writing to the church in Colossae, it's clear that Paul wanted them to know the divine nature of Jesus.

This was no ordinary spiritual leader.

**The man Jesus – was also God – full deity.**

This is the same Jesus that was born to Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem.

This is the same Jesus who was a helpless, fully dependent infant who needed His mother – the teenage girl Mary – to care for His every need.

In similar thoughts to what we read in Colossians; the writer of Hebrews reveals the divine nature of Jesus.

### Hebrews 1:3a

“He (This baby) is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature, and He (this baby) upholds the universe by the word of His power.”

In the birth narrative which Luke records, he tells of the shepherds who were just outside of Bethlehem, with their flock of sheep, who received an amazing – startling – exhilarating angelic announcement of the birth of a baby boy.

Here are some pics from Israel – of the traditional area of the shepherd’s field.

(Sign / Shepherd’s Church / Cave / Field / Jacob carrying a lamb)

*Luke 2:8-11 – Angelic announcement to the shepherds*

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear.

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.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

**Savior** = Redeemer – Liberator

**Christ** = Messiah – the hope of Israel – the hope of the world!

**Lord** = Master – Owner - God

**2 Corinthians 4:4**

“...the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

This event which we celebrate – this baby born in Bethlehem was a spiritually immense event in both divine and human realm!

But, at the same time, it was so simple, humble, and quiet.

### **The simplicity and normalcy of the birth of Jesus.**

The simplicity and normalcy are stunning, given the spiritual immensity of this birth.

Luke's description is so... plain, ordinary, unspectacular.

#### **Luke 2:4-7**

“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, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.”

Joseph and Mary are average people. They lived in the equivalent of a 1 stop light town.

A non-descript, unimportant town in northern Israel.

He is a tradesman – a carpenter / mason with very little formal education (as we regard education).

Mary was a teenage girl – 13-15 years old.

Her family carried no social clout.

Luke tells us they “...went up from Galilee...”

He says “went up” because Bethlehem sits at a higher elevation than Nazareth, even though when we look at a



map, they were traveling from the northern part of Israel, south – to the central part of the country.

Bethlehem – a small town about 5 miles from Jerusalem. Bethlehem’s original name was Ephrath (Ef-rath) – which we first see in **Genesis 35**. This town is where Jacob buried his beloved wife, Rachel.

**Genesis 35:19**

“Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem) ...”

Later, this town was named Bethlehem – which means *‘house of bread’*.

There were 2 cities that were called the city of David. One was Jerusalem – the center / capital of David’s rule as King.

The other was Bethlehem – the place of his birth.

To register in the census, which was a decree from the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus, Joseph had to travel about 80 miles to Bethlehem – because, as Luke tells us, “...he was of the house and lineage of David...”

All those whose bloodline was from David – would need to register in Bethlehem – the place of David’s birth.

Joseph takes Mary with him on this trip.

“And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 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.”

“And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.”

How long were they in Bethlehem?

We don't know for sure.

We don't know if the familiar images we have of Mary and Joseph traveling – with Mary on a donkey – fully 9 months pregnant... we don't know how pregnant she was when they made the trip.

Luke simply tells us “while they were there”.

There's no detail as to how long before the birth they were there.

Some believe they made the trip when Mary was 5-6 months pregnant – just starting to show – in order to avoid much of the ridicule and shame.

Or, he might have taken her because she was close to giving birth – and there was nobody, besides him, who would help her.

We do know the couple was in Bethlehem for no less than 1 month after Jesus was born – which we covered some of that timeline last Sunday.

Let's read on...

“And she gave birth to her firstborn son...”

That's it.

Luke gives us this information in minimal detail.

Notice He is her “firstborn son” – not only son.

The Greek word here is very specific – Mary and Joseph had more children – at least 6 more (Mark 6:3). This grand – amazing – spiritually immense event in both the divine and human realm, is described by Luke in only 8 words.

God – becoming flesh – The divine entering human existence and limits – is written in the most understated way.

How simple and normal.

Luke gives us some other details.

“...wrapped Him in swaddling cloths and laid Him in a manger...”

***Why is this detail here?***

Why is it important what kind of ‘onesie’ she put on Him?

Because Mary does what was absolutely normal for every other baby born at this time in Jewish homes. They would wrap the newborn – sometimes with strips of cloth soaked in salt-water – which would be an antiseptic – but they would wrap the baby’s arms and legs – and then the body – and wrap them tightly – for comfort and warmth.

This was normal practice – and this is Luke’s way of making sure we know Jesus was a normal baby – was treated like any other baby – cared for as a normal baby was cared for.

They were in a stable – we know this because Mary lays him in a “manger” – which is translating a Greek word (*phatne*) which means a feeding trough.

**Step back and look at this entire picture.**

The birth of Jesus – God becoming human – aside from the death and resurrection of Jesus – the most spiritually immense event in history in both the human and divine realms.

*Yet, this event is so obscure – hidden from public view!*

It is so understated – modest – low-key – subtle.

The supernatural fusion of human and divine – was so normal and plain.

As you celebrate Christmas this year...

***May you realize*** the enormous spiritual event that took place that night in Bethlehem – when Jesus was born. Ponder the significance of God becoming a man – a baby – because of His love for you.

***I pray*** you will understand the divine nature of the baby – and the reason God clothed Himself in humanity – for the sake of the cross – to redeem you – to reconcile you to Himself.

At the same time – may you realize the simplicity of His birth.

He is approachable – normal – like any other baby.

His birth is one of the many expressions of His love for you - and His grace which He extends to you.

He was born – lived His life – and He understands what you go through.

He is compassionate and empathetic.

He ‘walked in our shoes’ – and through His suffering, we can be comforted – and best of all, forgiven.

Christmas - the baby Jesus – Savior – Messiah – Lord!

*Close in prayer*