

## *In the Fullness of Time*

*Luke 2: 6*

**First Presbyterian Church  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**Christmas Eve, AD 2016  
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

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In 1586, one of Europe's first modern historians wrote a piece for the Christmas Eve service. Caesar Baronius wanted the Christmas Eve congregation to see how the birth of Jesus fit within the history of world events. So Baronius summoned all the accuracy available to him in the science and the historical dating of his time. He believed that Christmas was an "event for which all history, both sacred and secular, had prepared."<sup>1</sup> His Christmas Eve proclamation went like this:

In the 5199<sup>th</sup> year of the creation of the world, from the time when in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth;  
The 2957<sup>th</sup> year after the Flood;  
The 2015<sup>th</sup> year from the birth of Abraham;  
The 1510<sup>th</sup> year from Moses, and the going forth of the people of Israel from Egypt;  
The 1032<sup>nd</sup> year from the anointing of David the King;  
In the 65<sup>th</sup> week according to the prophecy of Daniel;  
In the 194<sup>th</sup> Olympiad;  
The 752<sup>nd</sup> year from the foundation of the city of Rome;  
The 42<sup>nd</sup> year of the rule of [Caesar] Augustus, all the earth being at peace,  
Jesus Christ the Eternal God, and the Son of the Eternal Father....  
being conceived by the Holy Ghost, and  
Nine months having passed since his conception,  
Was born in Bethlehem of Judea of the Virgin Mary, having been made man.<sup>2</sup>

Of course we might want to re-date some of these events. But Baronius made the point that a real Jesus was born at a particular time in world history. He was not born in some shadowy, mythological "once upon a time." He entered the world in a moment that can be reasonably dated and a place that can still be identified. And, through the eyes of faith, we see that everything from the beginning of the world was leading up to that moment.

Luke says all that so simply, "And so it was, that while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered." Mary's days of waiting through pregnancy were completed. But not only that. All the days of the world's

waiting for a savior were accomplished at last. Everything came down to the night of nights when Mary brought forth Jesus and laid him in the straw of a feeding trough. The uncontainable God lay in a manger, God's great gift of himself to us.

It is a moment Christ's people have returned to again and again for twenty centuries. We keep watch on Christmas Eve to remember in such a way that this moment from the past shines into our present. That which happened once and for all in history lights us up again and again with hope. This is it. The night of nights.

Let's turn this another way. This hour, right now, has also been orchestrated by the providence of God. So many events have transpired that have led each person to be in this room on this Christmas Eve in 2016 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. All the twists and turns, triumphs and failures, have led each of us here. All that has been done to us and all that we have chosen, our own desires and the wishes of others, all have led each one of us to be here, now, tonight. Some of us had to arrange flights, drives, schedules, money, and family negotiations just to arrive here. We all had to manage purchases, dinners, traffic, expectations, and the getting ready. Remarkably, we are here. The night of nights.

Do you ever find that Christmas Eve right now reminds you of other Christmas Eves? Perhaps you have traditions that guarantee you do the same things so that you can feel that continuity with Christmases past. For instance, you might say, "Yes, we always go to the Bocage Christmas parade before church." Or "We always eat at Nanna's house after service." Traditions link our Christmases together. In fact, I find that Christmas Eve's stitch together my whole life, like beads on a strand. I can tell so much of my life's story just by recalling Christmas Eve's that have been. Do you relate to any of these? I remember:

How excited I was as a child to go to Christmas Eve services. It was all part of one continuous celebration of dinner, worship, presents, and being part of a family. In high school, when I had become an active believer in Jesus, the services became charged with a whole new energy as I understood something of the true meaning of Christmas.

But then came the year in my early twenties when I decided to stay home instead of going to church. I thought it would be cool to read poetry and have a drink, finding my *own* meaning. My mother pleaded with me to come to church. I arrogantly declined. So I sat in the empty house, full of myself. But nothing else. It was lonely and awful. I would never again shirk the community of faith on this night of nights.

There was my first year as a pastor assisting in worship on Christmas Eve. It was less than two weeks before my wedding. I was full of hope for the future. The whole world seemed ahead of me. I knew only Christmas joy.

Then there came several Christmas Eves where I was in charge of the family service. Something always went crazy wrong. Once the angel Gabriel went into diabetic shock while delivering his lines. Another year the incense device went out of control and filled the sanctuary with so much smoke a kid threw up. Another year I had memorized the Christmas Story according to Luke and expected to dazzle the congregation with my brilliant recitation. But as I spoke, I saw every head turn from side to side to side: a bat was swooping through the sanctuary, diverting all attention from the wonder of my elocution.

Skip forward to the last Christmas Eve we were in North Carolina. We were pretty sure by then that God was leading us to Baton Rouge. So it was poignant to be with that church family, all the more so since my seminary roommate and best friend Steve shared in serving communion. Of course in the process, one of us actually dropped a plate of bread all over the floor. The elders smartly stepped in front of us to shield the congregation's view of our frantic clean up. But it was hard to keep a straight face after that. Another funny story in our years of funny stories together. How could we know that in just three weeks Steve would be diagnosed with brain cancer and nothing would be the same?

A decade ago, on Christmas Eve my mother languished in Our Lady of the Lake Hospital. The decision had just been made not to prolong her life artificially any longer. It took everything in me to concentrate on the message as our broken hearted family tried to keep the festive night.

But just five Christmas Eve's ago, our older son Micah got engaged between services. Right in the Dunham chapel. I did not blame Rachael for looking at her new shiny ring during my sermon.

And there was the Christmas Eve service a week after a teenager in our church died tragically. I wanted to cancel Christmas, but you can't do that. The worship leaders all had to summon joy we didn't feel to get through service. We had to call upon our faith that the message of Christmas was bigger even than this.

They are all stitched together, these Christmas Eves past. I can tell my life's story through them. Usually I did not know the significance of the night until much later.

And so we are here. On this Christmas Eve. Of all the places you could have been, you are here. Of all the people who could have been here, it is you who came. Of all the reasons you might have shown up, God has his own reasons for your being here.

I think of a Bruce Springsteen song from one of his early albums. Bruce pleads with a lost love in the chorus, “I came for you, for you, I came for you.” It seems to me the very message of Jesus tonight. He says to us, “At a particular time in the history of the cosmos, I entered the world. I came for you. At a particular time in the history of your life, I brought you to Christmas Eve worship in this place on this night. I came for you, for you, I came for you.”

Everything led you to this moment, this intersection between Christ’s story and our story. Everything led to this night, this invitation:

Are you the wanderer, waiting for the path to appear that leads to your heart’s home?

Are you the prodigal in the far country who may yet catch the sound of your Father’s voice?

Are you here full of hope, grateful for this season of your life, for the people around you?

Are you on the edge of grief, languishing under the weight of illness, your own or that of a loved one?

Are you expecting a bright tomorrow or dark with worry about what will come next?

To each the news is the same. To each the news is uniquely personal. And so it was, that while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger. Unto us a child is born. To us a Son is given. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. I came for you, for you, I came for you.

Can you receive him deep into your heart in the midst of your present circumstances? Will you trust that the moment is now? Tonight two unique times

in the history of the cosmos meet together: the birth of the Savior and your life. His birth intersects with your arrival in this place before this holy table of communion with Christ. He stands at the door and knocks, saying urgently “I came for you.” Are you opening the door? Are you welcoming him into the world at Christmas, and into your heart this night? Eat. Drink. The table is set and all are invited.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Pfatteicher, *Journey Into the Heart of God* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> Caesar Baronius, as found in Pfatteicher, *Journey Into the Heart of God* pp. 75-6.