

Good News For All People

December 24, 2015

Merry Christmas. If you are a visitor, we are thankful that you can join CrossWinds Church as we celebrate the birth of Jesus on Christmas Eve. My name is Kurt. I am one of the pastors.

Christmas is one of my favorite times of the year. Our homes take on a different ambience as we decorate them with a tree, lights and ornaments. This is the time of the year we bake and give away cookies and candy. Even better than the ambience and decorations is the time we get with our children. The younger kids have time off of school. Older kids are home from college. Those with grandchildren often have the privilege of spending time with their extended family. This year 100 million Americans will travel to be with family. I almost forgot to mention one of the best parts. Kids! Are you excited for the gifts under the tree? Cheer if you are excited!

Christmas is fun. It is a big part of life. When you strip away the family reunions, the tinsel, tree and presents; one question remains. *Why is it important to celebrate Christmas?* Tonight we will look at the Christmas story and learn why it is important to celebrate Christmas. I want you to go home with more joy and enthusiasm to celebrate Christmas than ever before.

To understand why it is important to celebrate Christmas we will study the Christmas story from Luke 2. You heard portions of that story earlier tonight. After studying the Christmas story, we will look at a bit of Old Testament and a

touch of the New Testament to help us understand the importance that first Christmas night and it is so important to celebrate today.

God is in control of all things, even when we don't see it.

Let's look at Luke 2 for the story of Christ's birth.

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. 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. Luke 2:1–5 (ESV)

As Luke prepares to tell us about the birth that changed the world, he draws our attention to someone that was the ruler of the world, Caesar Augustus. Of course he didn't rule the entire globe. From the perspective of people in the Mediterranean world, Caesar Augustus was the ruler of the known world. His name wasn't always Caesar Augustus. His birth name was Octavian. When he took over Rome and created the pax romana and brought peace to the known world, the Roman senate renamed him Augustus, which means the majestic one.

While the ruler of the known world was busy expanding his kingdom and governing his subjects, Jesus—the true and rightful ruler of the world, who is the real majestic one, was born in a tiny village on the eastern end of the Roman empire.

When Luke draws our attention to Augustus, and how God used him in the Christmas story, he is teaching us about God's sovereign power. Without Augustus realizing it, God used him to make the Christmas story a reality. God put into Augustus' heart the desire to have a census of his empire for the purpose of taxation. God put this in Augustus' heart at just the right time to move Mary

and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem for Jesus to be born. That fulfilled prophecy God gave about Jesus hundreds of years before about Jesus' birth.

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. Micah 5:2 (ESV)

This says that in Bethlehem will be born the one who will rule Israel, whose origins are literally from eternity. Literally that means that the one to be born in Bethlehem comes from eternity. That means he is God.

Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem. God moved Augustus' heart to have a nation-wide census at the right time to move Mary to Bethlehem for Jesus to be born.

Proverbs tells us about God's sovereign power over even the heart of kings and world rulers.

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

The first thing we notice in the Christmas story is God's amazing power. He is large and in charge over everything in the world. He inspired Micah hundreds of years before Jesus to say Jesus would be born in Bethlehem. He moved the heart of Augustus—the ruler of the world, to have a census at just the right time to move Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem so when she gave birth in Bethlehem to fulfill prophecy. God is sovereign over everything and everyone. God has everything under control.

This is a needed reminder for all of us. Even though our life may feel random, like it is spinning out of control, when things are out of our control, they are not out of God's control. God has everything under complete control. He

has a good reason for things happening the way they do, even if we don't understand those reasons.

Tonight, if you are here with a life that feels out of control, I give you the Christmas story. Rest your life in God's hands. God is large and in charge of all things, even the heart of presidents and kings.

God sometimes operates in ways we don't expect.

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. Luke 2:6–7 (ESV)

Many of the Jews living in Nazareth made the 90 to 120 mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem at least once a year for Passover. This is a road trip that Mary and Joseph probably made more than once. It was a hard trip.

Incidentally, Luke makes no mention of them having a donkey. The idea of Mary riding a donkey stems from a mid-second century tradition. It is not found in the Bible. Given their financial status, is it likely that Mary and Joseph made this journey on foot and they carried most of their own provisions. Walking 120 miles carrying most of your own provisions was an accomplishment for a healthy man. It was even more of an accomplishment for a woman that was nine months pregnant.

While Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem, Mary went into labor and Jesus was born.

It may also come as a surprise things the Bible doesn't mention in the Christmas story. It doesn't tell us about the presence of animals, a stable or even an innkeeper. These are many things tradition has woven into the fabric of

biblical history. We don't know if they were part of it. We are only told of swaddling cloths, a manger and an inn with no vacancies.

There is nothing unusual about swaddling cloths. In that day, people wrapped their babies in strips of cloth to keep them warm. Maybe Mary and Joseph brought strips of cloth for this occasion. Maybe they took their own clothing and sliced it into strips to keep Jesus warm instead of themselves. We don't know.

While strips of cloth would have been normal for that day, laying Jesus in a manger—an animal feeding trough, instead of a crib wouldn't be normal. Mangers could have been in the open air or in an animal pen behind a house. Sometimes they were carved into the rock of cave wall. This is most likely what happened. For centuries shepherds in the area of Bethlehem have made use of small caves in the hillside to protect their flocks at night. They have carved feeding troughs into the cave walls to keep their flocks fodder off the manure-laden floors. The earliest Christian tradition from the mid-second century describes the birth of Jesus in a cave. Today the Church of the Nativity is built over a cave in Bethlehem that many believe is the most likely place of Jesus' birth. Jesus was most likely born to Mary in a manure-laden cave and placed in a stone manger carved into the cave wall.

The last important detail is there was no room in the inn. In the ancient world inns consisted of a large room where everyone threw down their sleeping blankets and found whatever space they could. During a Roman census, the few

inns in the small city of Bethlehem would have been used by Roman soldiers. It is not likely that Mary and Joseph tried to stay in a local inn.

If you look at the footnote in your Bible on the word *inn*, you will see the word *inn* can also be translated as guest room for a private house. Since Nazareth was originally settled by Bethlehemites, and Joseph was going his home town to be registered for the census, it is highly likely that Mary and Joseph tried to stay with family, just like relatives come over our home for the Christmas holiday.

If that is the case, Mary and Joseph were the last to arrive in town for the census and there was no room for them to stay with family. Can you imagine a house so crowded there was no room for a pregnant woman about to give birth?

I am sure this is not what Mary and Joseph expected. Their hopes of Mary giving birth with the comfort of family or friends never came fruition. Most likely Mary gave birth alone, maybe the only help she had that night from Joseph.

Earlier in the Christmas story we learned that God is in complete control of the world. In this part of the story we learn that God often operates in ways we don't expect for reasons we may not never understand. I am sure giving birth in a foreign town alone and apart from family was not what Mary expected. Having no place to lay your child other than in a manger is not what Mary planned, yet it is what God planned.

The Christmas story teaches us that even though God is in complete control of our lives, he sometimes puts us in unexpected circumstance that we may never understand for years, or never at all.

Today we see the reasons behind these unexpected and unwanted change of plans in Mary's life. The humility of Christ's birth was the perfect way enables him to relate to all of us. At the time, I am sure Mary did not understand why the God who controls the universe let her face those tough circumstances on that first Christmas, but today, we can see God's wisdom.

Many times it is the same for our life today. God allows tough times tough and unexpected times in our life. Sometimes down the road we can see his wisdom and his love.

Christ's birth is good news for all people.

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 great 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. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" 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." Luke 2:8–15 (ESV)

It was customary for shepherds to watch their flocks by night. That is the way they protected them from predators. For the shepherds, it was just another uneventful night until the appearance of an angel filled them with fear as the glory of the Lord shone around them. The word glory points toward the visible manifestation of God's divine presence. God showed up. The shepherds were

enveloped with the powerful and visible glory of God. That is an amazing experience.

Of all people, why was the announcement of Christ's birth given to the shepherds? Shepherds were considered ceremonially unclean. They were outcasts of society. They almost never went to the temple. They were distrusted. Their testimony was not allowed in court. Why did the angel announce Jesus' birth to lowly people, the rejected and forgotten people of this world? Why did God announce the birth of Jesus to shepherds?

The reason the angels announced the birth of Christ to the shepherds is because the birth of Christ was good news not just for some people but for all people, no matter your position in society. Jesus came as good news for even the lowly and the outcasts, people like the shepherds. He came with good news for you and me.

Here is something interesting I found in my research. In the ancient world, Caesar Augustus was described three ways. He was called the savior of the world. He was called a god. His birth was called the gospel, that is the good news, for the world. Let me read you a quote from an ancient calendar written during the reign of Augustus to show you what I mean.

Providence set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom he filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior, both for us and our descendants,... since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the gospel for the world...¹

The ancient world said the great god and savior of the world was Augustus and Augustus' birth was good news for everyone. The angel had a different

¹ Quoted in Craig Evans, "Mark's Incipit and the Priene Calendar Inscription: From Jewish Gospel to Greco-Roman Gospel," *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 1 (2000): 68-69.

version of the story. The good news for the world was not the birth of Augustus but the birth of Jesus. Jesus, not Augustus, was the true God and savior of the world.

When you watch the news you can't help but see coverage for the 2016 presidential race. Everyones hope is to elect a president that will be our savior and our leader. The hope is that a good president will be good news for the world.

The Bible tells us the true god and savior of the world isn't running for office. He was born in the tiny town of Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. He is the only one who can fix our problems and the world's problems.

Why is Jesus' birth good news for everyone?

The Bible tells us that Jesus will one day return to save us politically and economically. Jesus came the first time to save us from a much more devastating problem, the problem of sin, which causes our death and separation from God. Sin is what is behind all the other problems in the world. Jesus came and fixed it.

If you were with us for the month of December, you were part of our series called Christmas from the book of Leviticus. We studied five different Old Testament offerings God's people were commanded to offer that are described in the first seven chapters of Leviticus. We saw how all of these offerings pointed toward Jesus and what he came to do. There was one major sacrifice we skipped. Instead of being found in the front of Leviticus, it is found exactly in the middle of Leviticus, in the sixteenth chapter. It is called the Day of Atonement. It is also known as Yom Kippur.

It was holiest and most important day of the year. While on the other days of the year the priests were allowed to enter the tabernacle, they could only go up to the curtain that separated the holy of holies—where God dwelled, from the rest of the tent. On this one day of the year they could go behind the curtain into the holy of holies and the very presence of God.

There was only one priest allowed to do this. It was the high priest. Usually the high priest looked like a king dressed in beautiful multi-colored robes. On this one day a year, he took off his beautiful robes and dressed in very simple clothing that made him look like a servant.

He went into the holy of holies first with the blood of a bull that he sprinkled once on the cover of the ark of the covenant and seven times before the ark. After having atoned for his own sin with the blood of the bull he came out and cast lots over two goats. One was killed. The priest took the blood of that goat into the holy of holies and with that blood that was brought into God's presence he atoned for the sin of the people. He atoned for all the unintentional sins, the intentional sins of which people repent and even the unknown secrets sins people have in their life.

When he came out of the tabernacle he put his hands on the head of the other goat. He confessed all the sins of the people onto that goat. The goat was taken far away into the wilderness never to return. This symbolized that not only were all the sins of God's people paid for by bringing the blood of the first goat into God's very presence but the guilt and burden of their sin was also taken

away. As it says in Psalm 103:12, God separated their sins from them as far as the east is from the west.

Why did God give them this special once-a-year day of atonement? The daily, weekly and monthly sacrifices that we studied in Leviticus left something undone. The blood of those sacrifices for sin could only be brought up to the curtain of God's presence. The only way to completely take care of the problem of sin was to bring blood to pay for sin into God's very presence.

My friends, when God the Son fused himself with human flesh in the womb of Mary and was born on that first Christmas, this is what he came to do. He came to die on the cross. He came to be our sacrifice for sin and to bring his own blood into God's very presence to pay for our sin.

For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. Hebrews 9:24–26 (ESV)

God gave Moses a specific design for the tabernacle because it was a miniature replica, a model copy, of God's true house in heaven. Jesus came at Christmas to take on human flesh so he could be the savior of the world. He saved us by dying in our place for our sin and offering himself as the once-for-all perfect sacrifice. He brought his own blood into God's very presence to pay for our sin once-and-for-all not in the earthly miniature copy of God's house in heaven but in the heavenly reality. He brought his own blood into God's presence to pay for our sin.

When Jesus died the Bible tells us the curtain that separated the holy of holies from the rest of the tabernacle was torn in half from top to bottom by the hand of God. This shows us the blood of Jesus had paid for our sin and the path into God's presence is open for all who have trust in Jesus and his once-and-for-all sacrifice.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Hebrews 10:19–22 (ESV)

My friends, the Son of God took on human flesh and was born in this world to offer himself as the once-for-all sacrifice for sin by bringing his blood into God's very presence for pay for all of our sin once and for all. That is something to celebrate.

But on that first Christmas, unless God opened your eyes to understand it, like he did for Mary, Joseph and the shepherds; you would have completely missed it.

Nothing has changed. Many people celebrate Christmas, but God has not opened their eyes to the importance of what Jesus did so they see no reason to celebrate. Has God opened your eyes? Many people look at Christmas as just a holiday with red and green and a time to see family. They completely miss the significance of why Jesus came. They don't understand the reason to celebrate. True good news, the God and savior of the world has come. It is not Augustus but Jesus.

If he has, there is only one question. How will you celebrate?

The shepherds couldn't help themselves. They had to celebrate Jesus' birth. They left worshipping God. They told others about the good news of that night, the true savior of the world had come. They were bursting with excitement even though they didn't understand all the implications of Christmas and what Christ came to do.

- They didn't know Jesus would go into the presence of God and pay for all of our sin by offering his own blood and obsoleting the entire Old Testament sacrificial system.
- They didn't know that Jesus would rise from the grave and conquer the power of death for all who have faith in him.
- They didn't know God's plans to make those who love Jesus the most blessed beings in the entire universe.

They didn't know that, but we do. We have even more reason to celebrate the birth of Jesus than they did!

My friends, if tonight you came as someone that celebrates Christmas as an empty holiday, I pray God has opened your eyes to the joy of Christmas. The savior of the world has come.

There is good news for all people. The great god and savior of the world has come. It wasn't Augustus. It is Jesus. Amen.



Dr. Kurt Trucksess is ordained in the Evangelical Free Church of America. He enjoys reading, writing, time with his family and wrestling with his sons. His favorite topics are preaching and ancient rhetoric. Feel free to contact him at www.Christ2RCulture.com (www.c2rc.com)

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