

Let the Stable Still Astonish

Luke Series #5

Luke 2:1-7

David Sunday

December 23, 2012

Let's turn in our Bibles to Luke 2 and behold the mystery of our Savior, born as a Babe in Bethlehem. There are three thrones of our Savior Jesus to which I like to return again and again in my preaching. There's the throne of grace and glory on which He is presently seated at God's right hand as the Risen Lamb. He is ruling over the universe by the word of His power, from which He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I love to contemplate His majesty and His sovereignty on that throne.

Then there's the throne of His cross that looked like weakness and foolishness in the eyes of the world. God put His power and wisdom on display to bring salvation to us sinners. Satan thought he had defeated Christ there but that cross was actually a throne of subversive power from which Jesus vanquished our ancient foe.

Here we're going to come back to the first throne of our Savior's life. Here we find Him ruling from a manger in Bethlehem—from a squalid, dirty feeding trough for animals. As often as we contemplate this story, it's more for our adoration than for our exposition. As we look at this story, the first thing we should always do is just bow before Him and adore Him. It brings tears to our eyes to see the wonder and glorious mystery of God becoming a man.

Before we read this passage, I want us to look at a simple poem Kate and I read a few years ago that struck us with its beauty. Listen to these words of Leslie Fields. May they calm and quiet our souls to relish the simple beauty of the nativity story with fresh eyes of wonder.

Let the stable still astonish:
Straw-dirt floor, dull eyes,
Dusty flanks of donkeys, oxen;
Crumbling, crooked walls;
No bed to carry that pain,
And then, the child,
Rag-wrapped, laid to cry
In a trough.

Who would have chosen this?
Who would have said: "Yes,
Let the God of all the heavens and earth
be born here, in this place"?
Who but the same God
Who stands in the darker, fouler rooms of our hearts
and says, "Yes, let the God of Heaven and Earth be born here -
in this place."

This is our God, born in a manger. Let's read Luke 2:1-7 from His Holy Word:

¹ In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴ 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, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ 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.

May the Lord open our eyes with fresh wonder and amazement at the glory of our Savior. I want to explore the implications of this familiar story from three vantage points.

Christmas & the Powers-that-Be (verses 1-4a)

Luke begins his story of the Savior's birth by setting it in its historical framework. He doesn't start in Judea; he starts in Rome—the seat of the most powerful government in the known world at that time. Caesar Augustus issued a decree. Quirinius served as the administrator of Caesar's dictates so a census was ordered that disrupted the lives of thousands of people. We get a hint of how Caesar viewed himself in verse one. He said, "All the world" must be registered.

Sometimes we Americans think of ourselves as the rulers of the world, too. We have a baseball championship in the fall that we call "The World Series" even though it's only made up of teams from the U.S. and one from Canada.

Caesar had similar grandiose notions of his power. Sure, he had a lot of power but he wasn't in charge of the whole world. In his mind though, he was the supreme sovereign—everyone was to bow to his command.

The historical record shows that Caesar Augustus' birth name was Octavius. He was the adopted son of Julius Caesar and the heir apparent. By the time Jesus was born, Octavius had assumed the throne and was the Emperor of the Roman world. He was a man whose inscription was on coins calling his father and himself "The divine Caesar and the Son of God." He took the title "Augustus" because he regarded himself "worthy of reverence and worship." In 17 B.C. he commanded a twelve day advent celebration in his honor, saying, "The turning point of the ages has come."

So this was the epitome of a humanistic emperor. But in the birth of Jesus, God sent another kind of Emperor and another kind of empire. In the words of Douglas Wilson, "Given what Luke understood about Caesar Augustus and the identity of the Christ, this story from his gospel has to be seen as a rivalry of kings." King Caesar versus King Jesus.

Now Caesar's decree to tax the entire world and call for this registration prior to the tax had to have been a huge inconvenience for thousands of people. Someone told them they had to go on a journey and they had no choice. Someone from a far-off place issued a bureaucratic decree and they had to obey. So we read that, "*All went to be registered, each to his own town*" (2:3).

Imagine what this would have meant for Joseph. He had to leave his business behind. He had to bring his betrothed wife—who was now in her third trimester of pregnancy—on a journey of some 80-100 miles through considerable peril in the winter. It was not what he wanted. It was not what they expected but it was thrust upon them by a power outside their control. So we read in verse four, "*And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea...*"

At this point in the story, it looks like a far-off dictator who couldn't care less about anyone else is calling all the shots, controlling the narrative, running Joseph's and Mary's lives—and perhaps ruining their lives. Yet we don't hear them complaining of the inconvenience or worrying about the outcome of these undesirable circumstances.

Likewise, most of us can easily think of undesirable circumstances in our lives right now that are not what we would wish them to be. Some of us are burdened by events that we didn't plan, unforeseen and unwanted troubles, journeys we're being forced to take, nights in which we're being robbed of sleep—all because of powers that are beyond our control.

Maybe you worry about the government and the effect of its policies on your business or your family. As worried as we might be, certainly we have brothers and sisters

in Christ throughout the world who are enduring much more strenuous regimes than we've ever seen in our own nation.

Or maybe it's in your life at work. Your boss, or the bureaucracy in some far off place, is bringing uncertainty and enormous stress into your life.

Or maybe you're dealing with turmoil in your house—a home that is under threat. There is turmoil in your life right now because of someone else's choices and decisions.

So it feels like your life is being controlled by the decrees of forces that are beyond your control. Remember in the midst of your turmoil that this was how God brought His Son, our Savior, into the world. Two people, following God faithfully, found themselves in a desperate situation beyond their control, forced to take a journey they would not have chosen to take, to a place they didn't want to go, at a time that was not at all convenient.

If your life is filled with those kinds of situations right now remember, you are not your own. Your life and your circumstances are not ultimately about you—just like Joseph's and Mary's lives and circumstances were not ultimately about them but about the Son whom Mary was carrying in her womb. Everything is focused on this Child. And though it might look like you are being dictated to by the powers-that-be, the truth is there is a divine plan and purpose for your hardships that goes far beyond what your eyes can see.

What looks right now like a misfortune or an intolerable burden, could later prove to be a great means of mercy and grace if you will submit yourself to the Lord in the midst of the turmoil and trust Him. For it is not the government that truly holds the power; it is not your boss or the bureaucracy of your company that controls your security; it is not your spouse or the people in your life who are ultimately in control of you. You're not the helpless victim of the powers-that-be. You belong to your faithful God Who gave His Son to be your Redeemer (Titus 2:14); Who knows you so well that not a hair can fall from your head without your Father's express permission (Luke 12:7); Who is weaving everything in history and everything in your life together for your good and for His glory (Hebrews 13:21).

Though we wish sometimes we could just have a merry little Christmas, often these holidays comes at times of turmoil and the requirement on our lives is not that we have less turmoil but more trust in our Heavenly Father.

Christmas & the Power that Weaves (verses 4b-5)

There are the powers-that-be: Caesar Augustus, Quirinius, governments, bosses, people to whom we're related. But behind all those powers and over all those powers, there is "A Power" that weaves everything together for our good and for His glory. If we will trust Him, we will ultimately know those two things are not at odds with one another but are in sync with one another. Our good and His glory will one day be shown to be in perfect harmony for those who put their trust in Him.

Look at the power that's weaving—we start seeing it in the middle of verse four. What at first seems to be an onerous imposition from imperial authority turns out to be a supreme irony. Verses four and five:

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.

Now did Caesar Augustus know when he decreed this registration that he was putting into motion the events that would lead to the birthday of a King Whose power and authority would infinitely outstrip his own feeble power and Whose reign would eternally outlast his own little finite lifespan? This decree of Caesar's was bringing Joseph and Mary to a place where they needed to be but they would never have gotten there on their own. Little did Caesar Augustus know that when he was lifting his little finger to tax the world, God was lifting His mighty hand to save the world.

The prophet Micah had prophesied long before about Bethlehem, the birthplace of King David, the one on whom all the hopes of Israel were fixed. The one whose legacy inspired generation after generation of God's people. For to David was promised a kingdom that would never end. One of his descendants would sit on his throne and rule forever in righteousness and peace. The prophet Micah had said that this King would be born in Bethlehem. Listen to his words from Micah 5:

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. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And he shall be their peace.

Here in the little town of Bethlehem all the hopes and all the fears of all the years would come together on the night Jesus was born. Do you see what Luke is doing here? He's showing us a stark contrast between the powers-that-be in Rome and the Power that is weaving all these events together from heaven. He's showing us it's no accident that this imperial decree—which seemed so cumbersome, so inconvenient, so threatening even to the safety of this young, pregnant girl—would result in her Baby being born at just the right place and just the right time.

No, of course Caesar did not know what God was up to. Had he known whose birth he was arranging in precisely the place where the prophets had foretold, he would never have issued the decree. We often don't know what God is up to, with unwanted events, unforeseen circumstances and troubles of our lives. But if we will trust that behind it all there is a Hand that is weaving these things together in mercy and love, there we can find the secret of contentment, joy and peace in the midst of our turmoil.

What a difference it makes if in our unwanted events and unplanned journeys and unforeseen troubles we could trust that there is a Hand of mercy and love Who is weaving it all together for a grand and glorious outcome—that He is using not only the mundane irritations but the most burdensome trials of our lives to advance the glory of the gospel of His blessed Son in us and through us in ways we cannot even begin to estimate. Herein lies contentment, joy and peace—when we can rest in the assurance that our lives are not being dictated by the selfish designs of sinful men but by the saving purposes of a good and gracious God.

I love how Jon Bloom (President, Desiring God) applies this point:

“Maybe what we need most this Christmas is not less turmoil but more trust. For God chooses stables of desperation as the birthplaces of His overwhelming grace.”

There are the powers-that-be but there is a Hand that is weaving all these things together for good and gracious purposes. In your life right now, the main thing God is seeking to accomplish is to advance the gospel of the glory of His Son, Jesus Christ. If you will trust Him, He can even use what seems most onerous, most burdensome, most undesirable to achieve that gracious end. Trust Him.

That leads us to our last point. We've seen the powers-that-be but we see that behind that there is a Hand that weaves. Now in verses 6-7, let us also ponder...

Christmas & the Power that Became Weak (verses 6-7)

This God Who rules the universe, how does He manifest His power and glory when He comes into our world? Look at verses six and seven:

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.

We see three important truths from this very simple description of the birthday of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

God became a Baby. Just ponder that. We acknowledge the Fatherhood of God but I want you to ponder to Baby-hood of God. He became a Baby! He was born just like each of us. His mother went into labor just like our mothers. She gave birth to a Son Who, coming forth from His mother's womb, looked just like we did when we were born. He had eyes, ears, mouth, nose, chest, stomach, hands and feet—just like you and I do. He gurgled and—contrary I think to the lyrics of “Away in a Manger—He cried. He was fully human. His mother nursed Him just like any other child is nursed. She wrapped Him up in swaddling clothes which was the practice of mothers in the ancient Near East. They took strips of cloth and bound their babies tightly so their fragile arms and legs would not become malformed or fall out of joint. These cloths also protected His tiny body from exposure and cold in the place where He was born.

This is where our salvation begins—not with a magisterial king coming in pompous splendor, adorned with all majesty and glory—but with a tender, tiny Baby. When I see that, I hear God saying to a sinful world, “Welcome. Come to Me. Fear not for I come to you first as a Baby.” Who cannot be drawn in by a tiny baby? Babies have that effect in families. Consider people who didn't even know how to talk to each other before or were at odds with one another. Put a little baby in their midst and suddenly their hearts are drawn close together.

If God comes to us in such a tender, loving way, does that not underscore the truth of John 3:17? *“For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.”*

Stand in awe of the Baby-hood of God and follow the counsel of Oswald Chambers who said, “Beware of posing as a profound person; God became a baby.” Beware of thinking, “You know, I'm really hot stuff. Boy, do I know a lot. Boy, am I wise. I'm so

profound that people should really respect me.” God showed the depths of His profundity by becoming a Baby. He comes into our world in weakness.

The Wonderful Counselor, boundless in might,
The Father’s own image, the beam of His light;
Behold Him now wearing the likeness of man,
Weak, helpless and speechless, in measure a span.

O wonder of wonders, which none can unfold:
The Ancient of Days is an hour or two old;
The Maker of all things is made of the earth,
Man is worshipped by angels, and God comes to birth:

The word in the bliss of the Godhead remains,
Yet in flesh comes to suffer the keenest of pains;
He is what He was, and forever shall be,
But becomes what He was not, for you and for me.

Then let us adore Him, and praise His great love:
To save us poor sinners He came from above.

(Great God of Heaven by H.R. Bramley)

God became one of us—a Baby. And we see that **God became poor**. None of us planned our own birth. I think you’d all agree that one day we just landed here in the world and a lot of people had done a whole lot of preparation to make sure we would be born in a place of comfort and safety. That every need of ours would be met. That we would be cared for. Not God. He alone had the prerogative of planning His own birth and what did He plan? God became poor.

Look at verse seven: She *“wrapped him up in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger.”* A manger? What we know about this word is that it was a feeding trough for animals. We also know that Bethlehem was a little town and any lodging place they could have found there would have been squalid and primitive in comparison to modern-day expectations.

A couple times in my life I’ve stayed in conditions that I thought were less than satisfactory. One was with my son in Kampala, Uganda. It was a little hard to go to sleep at night in what we would call a squalid hotel. We had a shower, water, a bed but it was beneath what we expected.

Jesus came into the world, not even in a squalid lodging place because they couldn’t find any room for Him there. *“He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him”*

(John 1:11). Even today, we are still sending Jesus out to the shed. Out with the animals. Maybe it was in a cave or maybe in the open courtyard or maybe in a stall adjacent to the local lodge. We don't know the exact details of precisely where He was born but we do know this: He was with the animals. He was out from where all the people were. His first bed was a feeding trough.

Mary—alone. Far from home. No midwife. No maid. No fire. No light. No hot water, nor even cold water. No bed. No bathtub. His poor young mother never had a baby before and there was nobody to show her what to do.

The Lord—the Creator of the universe—was born, not surrounded by gold and silver but by mud and clay. He comes, not as a Prince but as a Pauper. While multitudes of angels are praising God the Father in nearby fields, God the Infant shivers in a stable. It's a wonder He didn't freeze.

“In short,” says Phil Ryken (President, Wheaton College), “everything we know about the birth of Jesus points to obscurity, indignity, pain and rejection. One of the great mysteries of our universe is that when God the Son became a man He spent His first night in a barn.”

Why was there no place for them in the inn? Could not God have arranged for the birth of His Son to take place in more dignified accommodations than this? He could have—but He chose not to do so. He who was rich beyond all splendor, all for love's sake became poor (2 Corinthians 8:9). He fully identified with everything about our humanity, minus the sin, so that He might lift us out of the impoverishment that sin brings into our lives. That means there is nothing in your life that Jesus does not understand. The hunger, the thirst, the fatigue, the tears, the shrinking from death, the agony. He knows our need and our weakness is no stranger to Him.

His life began with no room in the inn—His life ended with spitting, scourging, spikes and nails. This manger—this throne—is just mile marker number one on the highway that took Jesus to Calvary and never for a day of His life did Jesus take a detour off that Calvary Road.

God became poor. We also see that **God does not run from our smelliness**. I borrowed that phrase from an old missionary named Jack Miller who wrote a letter to a colleague of his who was very discouraged. He said to his friend, “God does not run from our smelliness.”

Now friends, at Christmas we sing these profound words, "Lo, how a rose e'er blooming." Jesus is the Rose. He's lovely. His fragrance is sweet. He's full of adoration. He is God's most splendid, most radiant, most full of beauty Creation. Of all the universe, Jesus is the Rose. But remember, He was not born in a rose garden. He was born in an animal stall. He spent His first night in a feeding trough. And wherever you find animals, you know what else you find—dung. And it doesn't smell good.

Why such indignity? Why such foulness? Why was Jesus born in the stench and the muck and mire and mess of our world? He was born there to show us that our sin, though it is repulsive to God, does not repel Him from us but instead moves His heart to draw near to us. In all our stench and smelliness, He came down—He drew near. He descended into the muck and mire of our world so He could lift us out of it.

Jesus loves you. He loves you not because you are so lovely, not because you smell so sweet. He loves you because of Who He is. He is love incarnate. He did not run from our stench and smelliness but instead came down into it,

In a trough.
Who would have chosen this?
Who would have said: "Yes,
Let the God of all the heavens and earth
be born here, in this place"?
Who but the same God
Who stands in the darker, fouler rooms of our hearts
and says, "Yes, let the God of Heaven and Earth be born here -
in this place."

(Leslie Fields)

Don't think you can hide your sin from Jesus and mask its repulsive odor. Don't think you can perfume it up by spraying some good works over the veneer of your sinful life and think that He won't notice. Jesus knows very well the stench of sin. He can sniff it out even when we've tried to mask the smell with our good works. Don't think you can hide your sins from Jesus. Don't think the stench of your sin will keep Jesus from embracing you. But don't think you need to either. Know that the stench of your sin will not keep Jesus from embracing you if you humble yourself before Him; if you let your heart prepare Him room because it's precisely into such foul places that the Son of God chooses to be born.

Let every heart prepare Him room!

O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray.
Cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.

O come to us, abide with us, our Lord, Immanuel.

(O Little Town of Bethlehem by Phillips Brooks, 1867)

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