

I. Advent in Biblical Perspective
The Kings of Christmas
“Caesar Augustus—King or Pawn?”
Luke 2:1–7
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December 6, 2020 • Sunday Sermon

We’re going to look at three passages this morning. I’ll start with two of them and the first being Micah 5:2 and then Luke 1. This passage in Micah was written hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus and this is what the Prophet declared in Micah 5:2; [2] *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.* This was prophesied all the way back to Genesis 3:15 with 60 plus prophesies that will be fulfilled that night in Bethlehem. Luke 2 records this event for us but Luke 1 is important before we get to Luke 2. Here is this prologue to the Gospel of Luke.

Luke 1:1–4 says [1] *Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, [2] just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, [3] it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, [4] that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.*

The grass withers, the flower fades, the Word of God abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

In the Advent season I do a series of sermons to help us look at the coming of Christ, the birth of Christ and the doctrinal themes that are attached to it. This year I chose passages related to the Kings of Christmas. It will be no surprise on Christ Sunday of Advent that I will be preaching on Christ and the regal Wisemen I’ll be doing on the fourth Sunday. On the third Sunday there is another King in the Advent that we will be looking at and that is King Herod the Great. In this study we’ll be looking at a big time King, Caesar Augustus, who sits as a Roman King over the entire civilized world at this time.

We will get there by looking at the Gospel of Luke which gives us our basic information about him in the context of the birth of Christ. There are a lot of extra Biblical narratives that give us information about him which I have looked into, because he is a real Caesar that ruled in the days that Jesus was brought forth of a virgin. Luke records things about him. We will look at Luke 2 and 3 as well. Luke is an interesting author.

We know Luke was a companion of Paul from his second missionary journey on. We also have a lot of history about Luke that is available outside the Bible as well from various disciples of disciples who were discipled by the Disciples. We know Luke was from Antioch. He was educated as a doctor. We know he died a peaceful death at age 84 in his home which is unlike a lot of followers of Jesus. We know he was a noteworthy faithful companion. It just pulls as my heart when I read the last thing Paul writes when he is in Rome under his second imprisonment. This cistern they dug out for those facing capital punishment is still there today which was his final cell where he died. In II Timothy he talks of wanting his final cloak because he is cold, the sacred writings, the Scripture, send people to me for I have been deserted by all (II Timothy 4:11). Luke was a medical missionary which would be very important to Paul. There

were numerous times Paul would need a doctor after city officials finished with him (beating, stonings, whippings, etc.), as well as other afflictions he had.

Luke was also a leader who Paul would sometimes leave behind as Luke would help churches get elders, like at Philippi. Luke was also interesting as an author and writer. Luke writes two books of the Bible – Luke and Acts. He writes both of them to Theophilus and we're not sure who he is. The first book he wrote is a 33 year compilation of the birth and ministry of Jesus. It's a real, historical biography. He does the same thing as Jesus continues to do and teach through the body of Christ, His church in the book of Acts and that book covers 33 years as well. I happen to be of the opinion that he wrote a third volume of which I believe he was the chief author of Hebrews but that is purely my speculation.

We do know something about his writing. He is not haphazard. He's the first one to let you know he knows he is not the first one to write about the life and ministry of Jesus. When Luke produces his Gospel Matthew and Mark have already produced theirs. Likely others have made some kind of attempt as well. Matthew, Mark and John make some theological decisions about where they put things in their Gospels whereas Luke just writes a chronological event. He has talked with the primary sources and eye witnesses and the things that Theophilus has taught about Jesus, Luke has put in order so you can know for certain the things that have been taught. Luke is giving a historical account. That is why his Gospel starts the way it does.

Let's look at Luke 2. If you were writing about the birth of Jesus would you use seven verses? I could come up with an essay that went on and on but Luke covers Christ's birth astonishingly and economically in seven verses and astonishingly and astoundingly rich and deep in its content. Luke 2:1–7 says *[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.*

By saying in Luke 2:1a, *In those days...* Luke has just put Christ's birth as a historical event with real people, real places, and not a mythological wish or a fabled desire. Once this is produced/written in 62 to 66 A.D. with its companion Gospels – Matthew and Mark – you could go check him out. The Roman world, the known civilized world at that time was going to be registered as a census which was put in place for multiple purposes by Caesar Augustus and this is something that is checkable. It was the first of a number of planned registrations. It was an administrative strategy for financial, economic, taxation and military reasons that would be repeated every 14 years. The next time this is done in Acts 5 it will cause a Jewish rebellion.

We know that Quirinius was governor at two different times over this region of Syria in which Judea, Jerusalem and Bethlehem were found. Then in this Luke 2 text we are given a case study of one who went to their own town to be registered for this census – Joseph. Joseph goes from the region of Galilee to the region of Judea to Bethlehem because that was his ancestral home, from the line of David. We also know this from the genealogy given to us in Matthew 1 in whose writings were already out before Luke's. We also know from Mary is from the lineage of David as well. Joseph could have made this trip by himself but he brought Mary with him.

Mary is Joseph's betrothed wife. They had not finished all the steps yet. There are three steps – betrothal, ceremony and consummation. They had not arrived at consummation because

Mary had conceived as a virgin betrothed to Joseph and Joseph had been instructed to keep her a virgin. Many people think of betrothal like an engagement but it's more than that. In fact, if you break this betrothal you have to get an approved divorce as Joseph considered the possibility of doing back in the book of Matthew but he was informed that had not been unfaithful and he was to keep her as his wife plus to keep her a virgin until after the birth of Christ.

I'd like to point out the accuracy of Luke 2:7 where it says it was 'her firstborn' because it was Mary's firstborn but it was not Joseph's firstborn. His would come when they had their next child. We also know that Joseph and Mary have other children so Jesus had brothers and sisters. It's also interesting that Luke brings out that Christ was wrapped in swaddling cloths because while swaddling cloths may be various benefits it didn't have the benefit intended. It was an act of medical ignorance for the baby came out from the womb all curled up and the thought of the day was the baby had to be straightened out with tightly bound cloths less the bones be settled in a curved place. Jesus is born in a real time in which they didn't have the medical knowledge we have today. This will serve another purpose according to the providences of God.

Jesus was laid in a manger which was known as a cattle trough. There are two names for an Inn and one is a commercial Inn and the other was a hospitality Inn. The hospitality Inn would have been known today as a guest room and it would have been known as the upper room. When they built homes back then they would build homes over a cave where the animals would be put. In the winter the animal heat would rise plus they would be nearby if you needed to gather eggs or something. Then the house was built for everyone to live in and then there was the special place in the house where the open air would blow which was the open room at the top – the upper room.

I believe that Mary and Joseph were going to one of their relatives and because of the census the place was filled up so there was no room for them. Here is the moment where some would preach against capitalism by saying 'that capitalistic inn keeper, how horrible is he to put this pregnant teenage girl down in a stable for he is just trying to make money.' But that's just not accurate. Even if it is a commercial Inn this inn keeper has already gotten a contract and rented the rooms. I am upset with the person who had the room that didn't give it to the pregnant teenage woman. My mom and dad taught me that if there was not a seat available and a woman comes in you get up and give it to her and if I didn't then I wouldn't like the consequences. If a pregnant young girl came in and I didn't give up my seat I probably would have lost my life when I got home.

The sovereignty of God is going to use that because the whole point of this King who bears the scepter of Judah is that He will come and humble Himself to be found in appearance as a Man, to be born and laid not in a royal bassinette but in a cattle trough that likely was carved out of the side of that cave wall that had been created for a stable. There the King of Kings in a forgotten royal line is born who is King of all Kings. There was no royal robe – misguided linen cloths are wrapping Him around. That is the historical event Luke records for us which takes place in a real time in history. There is a real emperor, a real edict, a real event that isn't a fable. It doesn't start 'once upon a time...'

I don't think I'm alone in my historian thoughts on this but I think Caesar Augustus is clearly the greatest emperor out of all the emperors of Rome. It is interesting how he got there. He is the second Caesar. The first Caesar was Julius Caesar and he had no male heir. Julius Caesar met his demise in an assassination on the floor of the senate. When he died Julius Caesar in his will had appointed his grand nephew – his sister's son's son – Gaius Octavius, in our

history books, to be his son and heir to the throne. We now know him as Caesar Augustus because the senate so loved him – calling him a benevolent Caesar – that they said ‘there will be no other Caesar like him or will there ever be one.’ He is the supreme majesty of deity proportions. Can you imagine what that would sound like to an observing Jew at that time?

Caesar Augustus wanted a male heir so he went into this political marriage to this woman who did not bear him a male son but she did bear him a female daughter. He named her after Julius Caesar by naming her Julia. Augustus got rid of his first wife and the love of his life was Lydia but she never gave him a son. Have you heard of Pax Romana? It was the peace of Rome that covered the civilized world. This was from Augustus for he established this and why was this a big deal? How do you think Joseph could go across national boundaries with a pregnant woman and not worry about getting robbed? Augustus had established what we know as law and order and he even made adultery a crime. He created the road systems which will be helpful in fulfilling the Great Commission to get the Gospel around the whole world, a couple of decades later.

Augustus also declared the nations we conquered could keep their customs and religions, thus we got something from that in our country – the free practice of religion. After Jesus is born He will be circumcised and they were free to practice that. Then in 40 days He will be brought and presented at the temple and Mary is going to be cleansed. Here is where they will present the first born offerings. So here is this free practice of religion that is established under the rule of this Caesar Augustus who has also given an edict that then brings Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. Even though Joseph didn’t have to bring Mary to be registered he brings her because she was with Child. You might be thinking that would be a reason to leave her at home so why is it that Joseph didn’t see this as a reason to leave but to bring her?

I am going to suggest something that I think is Biblically informed speculation. This is the same Joseph who when he found out she was pregnant wanted to divorce her “quietly.” He did not want to expose her. Once he gets the information of the miraculous conception he sets out in obedience to keep her a virgin and then they would fulfill the betrothal into consummation after the birth, and I believe this compassionate man takes her with him because he did not want to leave her alone due to the gossip and slander in that small town.

Secondly, there is no evidence of any family in Nazareth. Most of their related family would be in Bethlehem. I know this is speculation but there are no other children he could leave her with. We know of Elizabeth back in Judea near Jerusalem but other than that we don’t know of anyone.

Thirdly, Mary is going to give birth to their first child and Joseph knows all that they have been through. He knows what this is about and I believe he wants to be with her when she delivers. Men, our vow as husbands is to be with our wives. Honor and respect your wife. Live with her in an honorable way (I Thessalonians 4:3–8). So Joseph brings her with him but we don’t really know if she was put on a donkey or not but I’m sure this man who wanted to take care of her got her there the best way he could. While they are there she now delivers this Child so Jesus comes into this world.

So there is a real emperor, a real edict, a real environment and there is a real event that takes place. Jesus is born in that stable in Bethlehem, laid in a stone trough, wrapped in swaddling cloths with the medical wisdom of the day and then set aside. So what do we walk away with in this study with King Caesar Augustus – Gaius Octavius – looming over us in this account?

The birth of Jesus of Nazareth, that is the Christ, is real history but real history is really His Story – the story of a sovereign God in and through men and women and the affairs of this world is gloriously and wonderfully at work. This Gospel of Luke was produced to accompany two other Gospels – Matthew and Mark – at least, and there may have been other attempts not inspired by the Holy Spirit. We know it was available up to 64/65 A.D. that means people who would have been alive at the birth of Jesus would be still living. So they could have received what Luke wrote and could have gone to check it out by talking with some of the people he did his research with.

I have no doubt Luke did his research. I see many times in his Gospel where it says ‘Mary pondered these things in her heart.’ How would Luke know that? I think Luke wrote the Gospel of Luke after the second missionary journey of Paul when Paul was arrested in Jerusalem and imprisoned Caesarea by the Sea. Caesarea by the Sea is a port city made by Herod the Great and given to Caesar Augustus. Luke who will be Paul’s companion in the Roman imprisonment is also with him there. I believe this is when Luke does some research by talking with Mary who would have been under the care of the cousin of Jesus, John. It said he went to eye witnesses. Luke 1:3 says *[3] it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for **some time** past, to write an orderly account for you...* He had been gathering information for a while and put it together in an orderly manner so that you could be certain. Then he comes up with phrases that he could have only gotten by talking with someone – Mary pondered and treasured these things (Luke 2:19).

If you had been alive when this was produced and it was handed to you, you could go to Bethlehem and asked if it happened. I’m sure they would have heard an earful. Much happened in that small town of Bethlehem. It was also where Naomi came back to after the famine in the land and had brought her daughter-in-law Ruth and all the women in Bethlehem were stirred up when Naomi and Ruth showed up (Ruth 1:19). I’m sure they would have continued telling that story about how Ruth and Boaz hooked up in his field and got married. Then you might have heard about Obed, Jesse and then David. Did you know that Samuel the Prophet came to Bethlehem? He went to Jesse to find from his boys a king and come to find out David was missing from that line-up because he was shepherding the sheep in the fields but Samuel wanted to see him. David will be king and from him will come the King of Kings and He will summon shepherds from that field of Bethlehem again many, many years later. Of course Bethlehem was stirred up when Mary and Joseph came because a Baby was born, shepherds appeared, angels appeared and you would have heard about all that happened in real history. All of this could have been checked out and can be.

In those days, these real events really occurred and a sovereign God is ruling and reigning. It is His Story. Does that mean that Caesar Augustus is a pawn or is he a king? Is he a pawn where God is moving him around, pulling the strings so that he gives this edict that will help fulfill 60 plus prophecies of the Old Testament and a very specific one in Micah 5:2? Maybe you will be surprised at my answer because one of my dear loves is the sovereignty of God, but I’m here to tell you that Caesar Augustus is no pawn. He is a king and God appointed him. God allowed it and sustained him in his kingship even with his blasphemous name. God’s purposes are being accomplished through him and you don’t have to affirm the sovereignty of God by diminishing the dignity of people or their positions.

Our God is not just King of pawns, He is King of Kings. Yes Caesar Augustus had power for when he said all the world was to be taxed all the world showed up. Joseph comes because he knows what you and I need to know. While I may not vote for that guy God has put

him there and as long as he doesn't make me transgress the worship of my God and the obedience to His Word, I'll honor him for I'll pay taxes to whom taxes is due, honor to whom honor is due, respect to whom respect is due.

Joseph gets Mary and takes her to Bethlehem. Joseph knows God is King of Kings, like Herod, like Caesar Augustus and he is free to act as he ought under a sovereign God with confidence that God will accomplish His purposes in His time, in His way, through real people really acting. Joseph is a real man making real decisions about Him and a sovereign God is really at work through him really making a husband decision. God is really at work with a real king, like the greatest Caesar ever in the Roman Empire with all of his power and God is not only going to use his road system, Pax Romana but a tax that is given and a census that is established to get the Scriptures fulfilled in Bethlehem in a real time, a real place, for His glory to bring forth in humility the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who would save us from our sins. This can all be affirmed in history, it's not a fable, for it's in those days.

When Jesus begins His ministry in Luke 3:1-2 it says [1] *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, [2] during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.* There is a new governor – Pontius Pilate – and a new Caesar – Tiberius. Who is Tiberius? He is the son of Julia, the daughter of Caesar Augustus – Octavius. So his grandson became the Caesar in the days of Jesus. A grandson of Herod the Great will build a city for Tiberius called Caesarea Philippi and he will have a city built for himself on the Sea of Galilee called Tiberius.

These are real people, happening in real space and time, real history and we have a real Savior. God has come in the flesh. We have really looked at Caesar Augustus and he really acted as a king but there is a King above all Kings. Man proposes, God disposes. Proverbs 16:9 says [9] *The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.* Proverbs 21:1 says [1] *The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He will.* There is a King of Kings who uses husbands, wives, fathers, mothers and kings to accomplish His Story and He does so gloriously. He doesn't need to diminish anyone for He is sovereign over everyone – that's you and men.

There is coming a day we'll stand before Him and the only way we can stand before Him in that day is to have surrendered in this day to the One He sent for us in time, space and history. There is a real supreme Majesty – it is Jesus Augustus, the incomparable God of glory and grace. The One in the stall was bound but 33 years later He would be bound to a cross to save us from our sins. The One who was wrapped in linen will be laid in a tomb wrapped in linen cloths. The One who in His birth was found in a stone hollowed cave, will be buried in one. The One who was laid in a hollowed out stone trough, will in a stone tomb be laid in another trough but the God of history will speak and no grave will hold Him. On the third day He arose, ascended and this God who has sovereignly shown Himself in history tells you the next event in history and that is that He is coming again.

I want to remind you that it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God and you don't have to for today you can surrender to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who died on that cross and rose again so that you and I can have life everlasting. It is real history in those days – not once upon a time – and I pray in this day this King is yours. You come. Perhaps you have come to this Savior, then you go for Him to bring others to Him who came for them. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could spend in Your Word. Thank You so much for the Lord Jesus, who is this glorious King of Kings. I'm sure 2000 years ago it looked even to the line of the King, Joseph and Mary, as if the scepter had left Judah, but in the moment of greatest darkness under a king who proclaimed supremacy with his name, the King of Kings comes forth, using His very edict to fulfill the Word and be humbled to redeem us from our sins. This is a real day in December 2020, a real moment in history, I pray that everyone reading this today, if not before, will surrender to Christ as Lord and Savior, who surrendered not His deity but His privileges to come and be humbled – this majestic One. Would You Father bring us to Him who humbled Himself for us that we might at the right time be exalted by Him, in Him and for Him? I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

Power Point

“Caesar Augustus”

- The Emperor
- The Edict
- The Event {note}

Life Takeaway

The birth of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ is real history, but real history is really His Story.

King? Or Pawn?