

1 Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. 2 This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. 4 Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, 5 in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. 6 While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

My wife loves christmas stories. Christmas movies are huge business, especially on the hallmark channel. She records them and I could have counted the number of them recorded on our memory thing, but suffice to say, if there's a christmas movie in July or any other month, it will get recorded on our hopper thingy.

She's not here today to defend herself, and really her love of that stuff is no crime. Those little movies, they used to be called a B movie, or maybe even less, they're not done with big name actors, their budgets are minimal I suppose for that particular business, and they have one job, to make the ladies feel good.

But what was once upon a time a yearly thing with movies like White Christmas and Holiday Inn and later the animated things with Rudolph and Burl Ives. We watched those same ones over and over, year after year, it was a seasonal thing.

At our house growing up we watched Heidi, the Shirley Temple movie. It would always be shown some time around Christmas. But now the Hallmark channel which grew out of a company that made Christmas Cards has become a multi-gazillion dollar concern

with one job. Happy endings. Feel good.

So there are endless christmas movies all year long, because, we don't want to just feel good at Christmas. Christmas specials have blossomed into year round feel good. And I love to tease my wife of 43 years. I can't stand to be in the room while they're playing, largely, but if I come in just at the last 5 minutes I'll give it a minute or two and then I'll say, "*OH! A happy ending. Who saw that coming?*"

All of these christmas movies have the same basic story line. First rule, absolutely nothing to do with a biblical account of the humble birth of the God of creation of the universes, in a stable in the middle of no-where.

That's the first rule, but the second rule is that christmas is magic. Magic happens at christmas. Every kind of magic. People are transformed by christmas magic. Greedy selfish people suddenly see the light and life changing things happen to them.

Usually they give up their successful city life to return to some warm cottage setting in the country with a fireplace and they discover they're really in love with their teenage person next door that was their childhood sweetheart and they'll leave all the wealth and success behind so they can return to their roots and of course true happiness.

None of that happens without magic. You need magic, and somehow, christmas is magic. There's a certain buzz happening at christmas time. Magic magic everywhere. Sometimes the good witch has to help out, just in case christmas time doesn't quite have enough magic.

And that is what our current secular culture has done with

Christmas. De-toothed, and quite tame, and good good good. And nothing anymore about any God stuff. Magic, yes, God, no no no.

Now, the date assigned as Christmas probably has little or nothing to do with facts either. The legend is that in the fourth century AD the bishop in Rome when asked to identify a day as Christ's birth, picked a rather notorious pagan festival and assigned it as Christ's birth in the hope of taming down the pagan celebration of sun gods and moon gods and worship that would bring another spring time.

So, with that introduction, let's quickly take a look this morning at what the world has lost, since they cannot distance themselves far enough away from God.

The true story is far more remarkable than any of the fiction.

1 *Now in those days . . .* What days. This is a reference to Luke 1:5 Where Luke begins his narrative with a time stamp; *In the days of Herod, king of Judea,*

This is Herod the Great. His father, Antipater had won some remarkable battles for Ceaser Augustus and was made a ruler or governor over part of Israel. This Herod came to reign then and had been reigning, for quite a long time, in fact he died very soon after the birth of Jesus.

This is the Herod that upon hearing that a rival King was being born to the Jews asked the jewish leaders where messiah was to be born and they told him in Bethlehem, and he had all the male babies born in the last 2 years executed.

He was an Idumeaun or Edomite. They were cursed because of their mis-treatment of the children of Israel when they were about to enter the promised land, so generally hated in Israel.

But Rome was occupying Israel and Rome is who put the rulers in place and gave them the authority to reign. That was the case with Herod.

So when Luke says *In those days*, the antecedent is *the days of Herod the king*, those days.

1 Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth.

And just here, we need to talk about some non-magic that we like to call *providence*. The providence of God. Because God is in the background arranging this birth since before the worlds began. Providence is when God is controlling events in the background, causing His purposes to come about.

And God has chosen some young people in Nazareth to carry out the birth of His Son, but God also gave words to the prophet Micah, which we've already referenced that Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, 90 miles away.

Micah 5:2 states; "*But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity.*"

Someone who has been eternally alive is going to be born in Bethlehem and is going to be ruler in Israel for God. So says the prophet.

So how does God get a young woman and her betrothed husband to be, when she is 9 months pregnant, to travel 90 miles on foot, from Nazareth, to Bethlehem?

He uses the ruler of the known world in Rome, of course, who has no idea that this decree of his will have eternal significance.

Daniel 4 when Daniel is telling King Nebuchadnezzar that he will be mad and live with the animals that eat grass for seven years, he says; 17 *This decision is the decree of the watchers, the verdict declared by the holy ones, so that the living will know that the Most High is ruler over the kingdom of mankind, and gives it to whom He wishes, setting over it the lowliest of men.'*

The most important most powerful man on the earth, the Ceasar in Rome, is nothing but a pawn in God's chess game. Messiah must be born in Bethlehem.

Gabriel goes to Mary in *Nazareth*. God needs her to go to Bethlehem, a difficult and uncomfortable journey in winter for anyone, how much more so for a young woman who is 9 months pregnant.

Imagine walking to Beatty. Now imagine doing it in December. Now imagine doing that while 9 months pregnant. But a ruler in Rome has made a decree.

God is provident over all of it. So much better than Christmas magic on Hallmark. God takes all of these unrelated elements and orchestrates them for His purposes.

Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth.

At that moment in history, all the inhabited earth belonged to Rome. This Caesar is Octavian. He was undisputedly the most important and successful of all the Caesar's. He was able to

establish the pax romana, or Roman peace, really all over the world.

He was a brilliant politician and a wise ruler. So much so that there are inscriptions to him in far away places, like Egypt, that state, Octavian, the saviour of the world.

So God uses the false saviour of the world to orchestrate the true saviour of the world's birth. Joseph and Mary must travel to Bethlehem, where Joseph's family is from. He is a direct descendent of King David, and his family comes from Bethlehem.

So it is part of how this decree is being carried out that Joseph and Mary must make an emergency trip to Bethlehem. Or else. No magic, just providence. God rules over all. He uses a Caesar to move two ordinary people to where He wants them, in the most inconvenient of times.

2 This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city.

Documents survive that name this *Quirinius* as governor from 6AD to 9AD. And a census also at 6AD. But that was the second census. And King Herod was dead by then, so that doesn't work.

We learn that in Egypt, census was every 14 years for a couple of centuries. So if that time frame works similarly in Judea, that would put this first census that Luke mentions as the first one, about 8BC.

Then we factor in that the Jews were rebellious as much as they could get away with, to Rome and what Rome wanted. So they put off doing their census in disobedience to Rome.

But Rome apparently says do it or else. And the best guess is that there was pressure to get this done, earliest at about 8BC and latest at perhaps 6 or a bit later. I think Herod is gone by 4BC.

So the exact date that Jesus is born in Bethlehem is lost, although the folks that Luke wrote this too would have it in their collective memory.

Celebrating birth days was to the jews, a pagan practice. The only mention of birth dates in the bible are about pagan peoples. The early church would be more apt to celebrate heroic deaths, than births. It wasn't until the fourth century that someone asked to nail down a day. And the reasons behind the choice of December 25th are sketchy at best.

Luke tells us; *everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city*

Also lost to us why that was important. In fact we do know in history that Rome couldn't care less where you registered, so this is something local. More providence. Lost to us perhaps. God uses a Caesar and some lost reason why you had to go to the city of your family, to get these folks to Bethlehem.

But a prophet from centuries ago said Bethlehem, and Bethlehem it is.

4 Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, 5 in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child.

We might think it odd that Mary would travel with Joseph to

Bethlehem. They aren't yet married. But we learn from the history books that betrothal in Israel actually moved women from the care of her father, to the care of her future husband during that whole period.

Even though the marriage isn't consummated, Joseph is responsible for Mary's care and well being.

And we don't know any of the drama that circled around a young teen age woman, betrothed, and very much with child. Has her own family she grew up with shunned her?

That's what Joseph figured he was going to have to do. But you'll recall that the angel also visits Joseph in Matthews account and tells him this pregnancy is like no other. Mary has not been unfaithful.

Matt. 1:18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. 19 And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. 20 But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. 21 "She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

Joseph, son of David says the angel in the dream. Joseph who would have been next in line to be king in Israel on David's throne if not for the deportation and occupation by other rulers, Joseph, you need to care for this special child, Son of God, inside Mary's womb.

His name will be Jesus and he will save his people from their sins.

Joseph may be 16. Mary may be as young as 13 or 14. Their culture would have shunned both of them by this point, I think. What a remarkable scene for two people who our culture would consider mere children to be traveling together, on foot, or perhaps by donkey, to a village 90 miles away.

And Mary is completely in Joseph's care, and both of them are completely in God's care, making this journey, 9 months pregnant. It's all very remarkable. It seems, "easy" is rarely in God's plans for His people.

6 While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger,

Talk about minimalism! With those words, the God of the universe was born among men. The God who spoke the heavens out of nothing, who rules every created thing paid a visit to this planet that is in rebellion against Him.

I want to shift gears here for a few moments and just read some poetry from Job chapter 38. I can't read the entire thing, but it goes on until chapter 42, but I just want you to get the sense of what has happened in our passage.

Job 38: 1 Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said,

*2 "Who is this that darkens counsel
By words without knowledge?*

3 "Now gird up your loins like a man,

And I will ask you, and you instruct Me!

*4 “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell Me, if you have understanding,*

*5 Who set its measurements? Since you know.
Or who stretched the line on it?*

*6 “On what were its bases sunk?
Or who laid its cornerstone,*

*7 When the morning stars sang together
And all the sons of God shouted for joy?*

*8 “Or who enclosed the sea with doors
When, bursting forth, it went out from the womb;*

*9 When I made a cloud its garment
And thick darkness its swaddling band,*

*10 And I placed boundaries on it
And set a bolt and doors,*

*11 And I said, ‘Thus far you shall come, but no farther;
And here shall your proud waves stop’?*

*12 “Have you ever in your life commanded the morning,
And caused the dawn to know its place,*

*13 That it might take hold of the ends of the earth,
And the wicked be shaken out of it?*

*14 “It is changed like clay under the seal;
And they stand forth like a garment.*

- 15 *“From the wicked their light is withheld,
And the uplifted arm is broken.*
- 16 *“Have you entered into the springs of the sea
Or walked in the recesses of the deep?*
- 17 *“Have the gates of death been revealed to you,
Or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?*
- 18 *“Have you understood the expanse of the earth?
Tell Me, if you know all this.*
- 19 *“Where is the way to the dwelling of light?
And darkness, where is its place,*
- 20 *That you may take it to its territory
And that you may discern the paths to its home?*
- 21 *“You know, for you were born then,
And the number of your days is great!*
- 22 *“Have you entered the storehouses of the snow,
Or have you seen the storehouses of the hail,*
- 23 *Which I have reserved for the time of distress,
For the day of war and battle?*
- 24 *“Where is the way that the light is divided,
Or the east wind scattered on the earth?*
- 25 *“Who has cleft a channel for the flood,
Or a way for the thunderbolt,*

- 26 *To bring rain on a land without people,
On a desert without a man in it,*
- 27 *To satisfy the waste and desolate land
And to make the seeds of grass to sprout?*
- 28 *“Has the rain a father?
Or who has begotten the drops of dew?*
- 29 *“From whose womb has come the ice?
And the frost of heaven, who has given it birth?*
- 30 *“Water becomes hard like stone,
And the surface of the deep is imprisoned.*
- 31 *“Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades,
Or loose the cords of Orion?*
- 32 *“Can you lead forth a constellation in its season,
And guide the Bear with her satellites?*
- 33 *“Do you know the ordinances of the heavens,
Or fix their rule over the earth?*
- 34 *“Can you lift up your voice to the clouds,
So that an abundance of water will cover you?*
- 35 *“Can you send forth lightnings that they may go
And say to you, ‘Here we are’?*
- 36 *“Who has put wisdom in the innermost being
Or given understanding to the mind?*

I would submit to you that the person who spoke these words to

Job, is the person who has just been born to two people, actually just one person, because while God provided Joseph to love and care for Mary as best as he could, that is the limit of his involvement in this birth.

Two people who have nothing. Jesus is born, just eight words, *And she gave birth to her firstborn son*; a baby completely dependent on two very young people who are so limited in their capabilities that He is born in a cattle stall and sleeps in an animal food trough.

We often find ourselves amazed at the completeness of the Lord's prayer. So few words, so much information to understand the vastness of God's dealings with men.

Our Father, who art in heaven; Hallowed be thy name!

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.

He is to be worshipped. He has authority to reign on earth, as He already does in heaven. It WILL happen. Then this reminder for us;

*Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*

Those words remind us that we are completely dependent. Dependent physically, give me bread, and spiritually, forgive my debt.

We are totally dependent. Your next breath you inhale is a gracious gift from God who sustains you through every heartbeat, every breath, until the final one.

This week a guy at one of the photo sights where I chatter with other photographers contacted me to tell me about another guy who had narrowly survived an embolism with a giant blood clot. And that was immediately after the hurricane blew his house down and closed down his local hospital.

This guy was very close to death and somehow got the help he needed in time. And my friend called on me to say something noble about it because I'm a preacher, right?

And I thought to myself, the last thing you want to hear is the truth. The truth is you are hanging over the fires of hell with a tiny cotton string we call life, and you very nearly fell in. That tiny strand almost failed. You got lucky. But not that lucky because if you don't repent of sin and cling to the Saviour, it's just a matter of weeks until the job is finished.

You missed it this week. But next week is coming. What you gained is an opportunity to cry out to God over your sin and ask Him to graciously save you.

Nobody wants to hear that. We are dependent on our creator for everything. Our physical bread, and our spiritual bread.

We read Luke's brief account of the God of creation being born as a man and we think, could you have been any more succinct. But the simplicity of Luke's words has a powerful lesson for us.

The Lord who spoke the worlds into existence, all powerful God of creation, the Lord of hosts, left His home and His position with His Father in heaven and came to earth as a newborn baby, dependent on 2 young people who quite literally have nothing.

His mother wrapped Him up in cloths and laid Him in an animals

feeding trough. No one came to help her. I doubt Joseph was good for much. If he's like the rest of us men he was probably running around in a panic like we all do trying to figure out what to do, while Mary just did it.

I'm going to close with some familiar words of Pauls. You've heard them before. But I hope that in light of what we've considered this morning, the words will have new understanding for you. Ppn. 2:

5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, and being made in the likeness of men. 8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Jesus left all the riches of heaven behind and humbled Himself. What could be more humble than a helpless baby who is dependent on 2 young people who have nothing.

He came into a world that had no place of comfort and security for Him. There was no room for Joseph and Mary and Jesus in the bustling busy world.

6 While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. 7 And she gave birth to h