

Finding Hope in the Christmas Story, Part 1

Luke 2:1-7

The story of Christ's birth is so special and so meaningful, and especially, I would say coming out of this year, so bleak and difficult. You understand that our hope is not in better government, it's not in a miracle vaccine, it's not in the reopening of our economy. If this year has taught us anything, it's that we cannot put our trust, our hope, in anything temporal or earthly, because all of that is passing away. And I think that God wants us to find hope this Christmas in this story, in the meaning of Christmas. So, we want to return again to that story, going back to Luke's gospel in Luke chapter 2, verses 1-7. You can turn there in your Bibles, and we'll look again at the Christ of Christmas, the story of his birth, and the occasion of his birth in Luke 2:1-7.

"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 governing 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. 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.”

There’s no, really, hint of sentimentality there in that story, as Luke writes it; just records the facts. There’s no fanfare, there’s no hype. But it is a faithful narrative of the birth of our Savior. And it’s up to us, really, to dig into the text and unpack what’s there. And what we’re going to see as we do the unpacking and digging is that there are three reasons, we’ll summarize it with three reasons for hope in this text. Three reasons that we can find hope this Christmas from this text. Three reasons for hope this Christmas: divine sovereignty, tender providence, and perfect redemption. At a high level, overarching everything, is divine sovereignty. Down in the details, the day to day of where we live, there’s a tender providence. And, undergirding it all, and getting to the

profound and deepest issues of need is a perfect redemption.  
Three reasons to find hope in the Christmas story.

So, first point, we find hope in divine sovereignty, divine sovereignty in the Christmas story. What I mean by that is that God sovereignly directs all things in the world; all its people, high and low, all its plans, everybody's plans, everything. He uses many, many means to accomplish his perfect ends. And that is what we see in these first two verses as God brings his son into the world. Take a look again at verses 1 and 2, "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 governing Syria." With that first opening phrase, as Luke opens using that language, "In those days," Luke has intentionally, there, joined this narrative, here, to what he started, back in Luke 1:5, when he said, "In the days of Herod, king of Judea."

That same phrase, exact same language, it sets the context of Christ's birth in the turbulent days of king Herod, called Herod the Great. This is during the declining years of Herod's reign, and Herod the Great turned into what can only really be

described as a terrifying monster of a man. He was ambitious, power hungry, tyrannical. He was suspicious, paranoid. He was in league with Rome, backed by Roman power. He was able to deploy soldiers and spies. All of that blended together as a recipe for a reign of terror. That's what his reign turned into.

At the end of his life, Herod suffered from a disease of the bowels, and some say that that explains his madness and the growing paranoia. It was affecting his brain, affecting his mind. He was anxious about rivals, usurpers, assassins everywhere. So, Herod surrounded himself with bodyguards. He deployed spies throughout the city of Jerusalem to report everything to him, and then he'd send soldiers to arrest, and imprison, and even execute, those who were dissidents, or those whom he suspected of such.

Herod didn't discriminate about who he would kill. He became suspicious of his own wife, Miriam, his favored wife. Becoming suspicious was enough to have her executed. His two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, they also fell under his suspicion, so he accused them of high treason and then had them executed as well. Five days before his own death, Herod had his

other son, Antipater, killed for suspected involvement in an assassination plot. All this, right before the first Christmas.

Herod's penchant for murder was so well-known that Caesar Augustus once famously said, "It's better to be Herod's dog than one of his children." It was this kind of wicked behavior that God was, even then, sovereignly using. He was directing all things, even those things, even horrendous things, all of them to obey the counsel of his own will. Herod's tyranny and his close collaboration with Rome incited a popular revolt in parts of the area of Judea. There were zealous Jews. They were indignant about Rome's presence in the land at all, about Herod's cooperation with a pagan power in raising taxes for Rome, a pagan power. They were aghast at this.

Two Galilean pharisees, Judas of Galilee, and Matthias, agitated and then led their Galilean disciples to rise up and oppose Herod in some ways. And that agitation eventually led to violence. Some of those disciples destroyed some of Herod's property. They tore down the Roman eagle that he had affixed and fastened to the gate of the temple, attacked Herod's armory, and for their trouble, Herod made an example of them, and he ordered

them to be burned alive, along with Judas and Matthias, to leave a lasting impression: Don't cross me.

The reports of growing unrest reached Rome, as Herod's instability started to trouble Caesar Augustus. Herod reigned at Caesar's good pleasure; he was a client king of Rome. He collected Judean taxes and sent them back to Rome. So, Caesar's concern was growing. He was afraid that the unrest in Judea would threaten his tax revenue. We note, there, in verse 1, Luke 2:1, that all this is happening during a time of a census. Caesar had, issued a decree that all the world should be registered. This is the third such decree. The first one was earlier in his reign, in 28 B.C., another was in 8 B.C., and this decree was issued in 6 B.C.

The, the census was a tool to register the Roman Empire, not just it's citizens, but also the people in the provinces and all the client states. This enabled an orderly administration from Rome. It kept the tax money flowing. And this is what made Caesar Augustus such a successful emperor. Caesar Augustus had no interest, really, in the administrative burden of a direct rule of distant lands, distant territories, but he had every

interest in taking their money. This is truly taxation without representation. This is Roman rule and the greatness of Rome was really funded by this tax revenue, poured in from the provinces, poured in from client states.

Tax collection was enforced by soldiers who extended the iron fist of Rome out throughout the empire. And Caesar used that money to ingratiate himself to powerful people: the Senate in Rome, Roman citizens. He built theaters, built public baths, he funded games, he kept the people entertained, distracted. He once boasted, "I found Rome built of bricks; I leave her clothed in marble." The Romans loved him. The Roman Senate loved him. Powerful oligarchs, wealthy people loved him. At his birth, an astrologer cried out, "The ruler of the world is now born!" And his string of successes fed this public perception that he was far more than a mere man. People cried out, "Oh, just and generous lord!" "Lord Caesar." Many hailed him as the savior of the world.

So, back to Judea. Here's Caesar, he's dealing, seeing this growing unrest in Judea. He didn't want to see these tax revenues flowing in from the land threatened due to some unrest,

some popular revolt, due to Herod's mismanagement of the land. He was concerned about the cash flow, but more concerned to keep the unrest in Galilee and Judea from spreading any further. Caesar didn't want to depose Herod, as, even though that would seem rational. But he knew that that would risk greater unrest. Quelling riots and rebellions and unrest is top priority, and, for doing that, Herod was violent enough to get the job done. So, he left him there. He was also, Herod was, shrewd enough to let the Jews continue their customs and traditions. He, himself was an Idumean, Edomite, mixed breed. And he saw himself as a Jew of Jews, even though he was mixed, of mixed blood. And so, he allowed the Jews to continue in their traditions. And, in Caesar's mind, he's going to, he wants to keep the census going. He wants to see the unrest quelled and dying down. And, to keep the census going amid these tumultuous times in Judea, he needed to provide some oversight, some resistance to Herod's mismanagement. And this man, Quirinius, was his answer.

Caesar sent Quirinius, who was a trusted friend, sent him to Syria, just above the province that Herod ruled. Caesar's relationship with Quirinius went back many, many years. He knew he could trust him to exercise careful oversight, and that's exactly what he did. Quirinius was a wise and decisive man. He



took swift measures to pacify the Jews and diffuse the tension in Herod's territory. Quirinius oversaw the census in his own province of Syria, and he ran that census. He conducted the census. But in Judea, he let Herod conduct the census according to the local custom while he stood in the background overseeing it.

If Quirinius had intervened to run the census in Judea, he would have had everyone register in his place of residence, which was according to Roman custom. Herod, though, accommodating Jewish custom, he let the Jews register according to their tribal inheritance. That meant that they had to return to their place of origin, to the territory of their tribe. So, Quirinius had the sense to back off and let Herod conduct the census in a way that placated the Jews and kept things peaceful.

All that to say, amid all of this high, medium, or low level, ground level human plans, human concerns, all the complexities of people and wills and concerns and riots and unrest, tax revenue, God is above it all, sovereignly directing all things. He doesn't let things go too far in one case, and he

lets things go a little farther in another case, because God is sovereignly directing all things. God is above this scene.

He is directing all human affairs, whether it's Herod's madness, and murderous rampage, whether it's Caesar's money worries, whether it's Quirinius's careful hand of influence, at the local, regional, and imperial level, it is ultimately not a matter of human will. The only will that matters is God's. His sovereign governance to direct all things to accomplish what he has decreed from before the foundation of the world, that's what matters.

And that's what really gives us hope. As we back off and think about this for our own lives, that's what gives us hope is that there is a sovereign God who's above all things, directing all things according to the counsel of his will. That's what the Bible teaches, and, if we did not believe that, we'd be in a world of hurt, wouldn't we? We'd be anxious, perplexed, confused, worried. This is so important for us to remember, to factor into our day to day thinking, that God is sovereign, and he is in charge.

If we're heading into even more turbulent waters this next year; if a future president of ours abolishes the American republic and inaugurates a new American Empire and installs himself as its new Emperor; if a future governor or magistrate becomes a tyrant and silences dissent by imprisonment or death in our land, and perhaps us seeing divine sovereignty at work in this Christmas story will help us keep level heads, no matter what hits us. It'll help us have calm hearts, no matter what water we wade into. It'll help us to have hopeful attitudes as we put our faith and trust in God, and in, what he's doing.

So, again, above the confluence of several factors indicated, by Luke, just by sighting names, by sighting times, all of this, again, it has the mark of true history because that's what Luke is recording: true history. And in the confluence of all these different interests, interests of Herod, interests of Caesar, interests of Quirinius, above all of them a sovereign God is directing all things according to the counsel of his own will. "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he wants."

God sovereignly directs all these things to obey the counsel of his will, and that includes this young couple in the text. It's not just at a very, very high level. It's at an intimate, low level as well. Look at verse 3, "...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 the lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child."

Again, if Quirinius had taken over and conducted the census in Judea, you know where Joseph would be? Nazareth; registering in Nazareth. God wanted him in Bethlehem. Why did God want Joseph down there, Joseph and Mary down in Bethlehem of Judea? Because God promised great hope of the Gospel in the prophet Micah. It relied on the coming of a very unique ruler. It says in Micah 5:2, "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."

On a human level, had Caesar Augustus not decreed, there would be no census, no need to register. Had Herod not provoked Jewish indignation, Caesar wouldn't have sent Quirinius. Had Quirinius taken over the census, Joseph would've been registered in Nazareth. But, in the sovereignty of God, whether it's Caesar, Herod, Quirinius, or even Joseph and Mary, everyone did what God predetermined, did what God decreed. It's God's decree that directs the world, beloved. He directs the will of Caesar. He directed Quirinius, he directed Herod; all of this to accomplish the sovereign will of God in the birth of his son. It happened precisely this way. It happened when he wanted it to happen, how he wanted it to happen.

Don't be troubled by election results, whatever they are. Don't be, don't be troubled by anything you see here in our land. Don't be troubled by anything you see in the world. All things are moving sovereignly, according to the sovereign plan of God, marching toward his predetermined end to accomplish all that he has decreed. This happened precisely this way, when God wanted it to happen. As Paul said, Galatians 4:4, "...when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son." When the fullness of time had come; not a moment later, not a moment sooner. It happened precisely this way so the birth of Jesus

would take place when he wanted it to happen and where he wanted it to happen.

Whatever mess we see at the ground level, God reigns sovereign above. He orders all things according to the counsel of his own will. So, that's the sovereignty of God in the birth of Christ, just a quick look at that. It gives us every reason to abide in hope, to endure in hope, to keep moving forward, step by step, in faithfulness and righteousness because we have hope in our God, who does all things perfectly.

Second point to see this Christmas: we can find hope in, number two, the tender providence we see in the Christmas story; the tender hand of God's providence in the Christmas story. We understand this, that the decisions of powerful people made at very high levels, they affect the day to day lives that we live, don't they? Sometimes there are people legislating laws and taxes and things like that that they never have to experience the result of. We do, though. They affect changes in our daily living. All it takes is a virus and we're all reacting, and changing, and adjusting.

Thankfully, that doesn't come around every single month or year. But it happens. All it takes is an election, which happens every four years in our country, for the peaceful transfer of power from one ruler to another, so there aren't bloody coups and assassinations, and all that. There's a peaceful transfer of power every four years in our country. But we all have to react, and change, and adjust to those things, don't we?

Politics was the immediate reason for the journey of Joseph and Mary, but the sovereign God is the one who directed their steps. Proverbs 16:9 says that, that "The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps." God is sovereign. He does his perfect will. But God, in the midst of that sovereign perfection of his will, outworking of his will, he's also kind. He's considerate, he's thoughtful, attentive to every detail. He accomplishes his will by the tender mercy and ministry of his providence. He gets down into the weeds with us.

So, whether at a very high level, or down at an intimate, low level, where we live, God is there. For Joseph and Mary, whatever's going on at a high level, way above them, they're not privy to any of that. They're just simple, humble people.

Joseph, a carpenter, Mary, in her teens. They're not privy to the things happening at Herod's level, Quirinius's level, Caesar's level. They don't have a news feed on their phones, constantly involving them. That's a blessing, isn't it?

But they did see that this order, this decree from Caesar, this registration order, being conducted, census conducted in their own land, this is an occasion to get the very pregnant Mary out of Nazareth before some, her somewhat difficult to explain condition becomes the subject of small-town gossip. But this is no small thing to plan this trip. Leaving Nazareth in the north in a colder time of the year to travel down south, down to Bethlehem in the south, not exactly a convenient trip or convenient timing.

Bethlehem was eighty miles away, or so, from Nazareth, about four to five days on foot in good weather. But here, it's wintertime. Mary's eight months pregnant, so they need to move slowly. That means extended travel time, more discomfort on the road. There's two routes that they could've taken from Nazareth to Bethlehem. The shortest route when straight south through



Samaria, but that was also the most rugged route for man and beast; not great for a pregnant wife, bumping along the road.

The longer route did cross over some mountains at first, through Cana to the east, and then descended into the southern shores of Galilee. It involved quite a climb at first, but an animal carrying Mary would bear the difficulty of the ascent and keep it smooth on the way up and the way down. It was a much flatter route, eventually easier going for Mary. It followed a well-worn foot path frequented by travelers going to and from the feasts in Jerusalem. So, after nearly a week on foot, a week or so exposed to cold, tired from the journey, sore from camping on hard ground, Edersheim gives us a sense of the young couple's relief as they approached Bethlehem, at last.

Edersheim writes this, "When, at last, they reached the rich fields that surrounded Bethlehem, a sense of rest and peace must have, almost unconsciously," ca, "crept over the travelers as, passing through the valley, they ascended through the terraced vineyards and gardens. Winter, though it was, the green and silvery foliage of the olive might, even at that season, mingle with the pale pink of the almond, nature's early waker,

and, with the," dark, "darker coloring of the opening peach buds. With a sense of relief, the travelers would turn, and through the break of the hills eastward, the heavy, molten surface of the dead sea would appear. Westward wound the road to Hebron, and behind them lay the valleys and hills which separated Bethlehem from Jerusalem and concealed the Holy City. But, for the present, such thoughts would give way to the pressing necessity of finding shelter and rest." End quote.

The couple is exhausted by this point; weary, hungry, thirsty. But all the way, God has been guiding them by his kind and tender providence, he's been leading them to the very perfect place. Says there, in Luke 2:6-7, that "...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."