



Luke 2:1-21
“What’s The Big Deal?”

December 24, 2016
(Christmas Eve)

Pastor Phil Thrailkill
Main Street UMC
211 North Main St., Greenwood, SC 29646
Church Office: 864-229-7551
Church Website: www.msumc1.org

“Following Christ From City Center!”

LUKE 2:1-21 (RSV*) "WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?"

Red = Echoes Of Roman Imperial Theology

ND		1) vv.1-7 GEOPOLITICAL EVENTS: SIGN OF BIRTH FULFILLED (See prophecy of 1:30-31).	
1	a1	IN THOSE DAYS a decree went out from Caesar Augustus 1:5, 3:1, <i>Augustus</i> (Gk. <i>Sebastos</i> = to be worshiped) that all the world should be enrolled./ <i>Oikoumene</i> (Roman coins), Census//1:5, Taxes, <i>Enrolled</i> (4x)	
2	2	This was the first enrollment, before Quirinius was governor of Syria./ 5 Moves, Rebellion, Augustus (44/42 B.C.-A.D.14)	
3	3	And ALL went to be enrolled, each to his own city./ <i>ALL</i> (vv.3,10,18,19,20), Acts 5:37 for alternative response, Ps. 87:6	
4	4	And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, 1:27, 32, 69, 2:11 which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David./ Fulfills Mic. 5:2-4 (Place/Lineage)	
5	5	to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child /. 80-85 Miles, Complies With Roman Law	
6	b	And <i>while they were there</i> , the time came for her to be delivered. No Late-Night Arrival, No Innkeeper	
7		And she gave birth to her first-born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, 2:22-24, 23:53, Wisd. Sol. 7:4-6, Ex. 13:12 and laid him in a manger (i.e. feeding trough), Odd, Lower Of 2-Level House, Isaiah 1:3 (LXX), 13:15	
		because there was no room for them in the inn/guest quarters. Gk. <i>kataluma</i> = Space Above Village Home, 22:11	
		Census + Birth, House Filled With Higher Status Family	
		2) vv.8-20 SHEPHERDS' TREK AND ANGELS' CHORUS. Source Of Much Great Art	
		a) v.8 Shepherds In The Field. Dishonest/Outside Law (b. <i>Sanhedrin</i> 25b), Friend Of Sinners	
8		And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, 4:18-19, Marginalized keeping (the) watches over their flocks by night. Sacrificed At Passover, Association With David As Shepherd	
		b) vv.9-11 Angelic Message To Shepherds (Emperor Language: Birthday/Benefits). Humble Birth, Glorious Announcement!	
9		And the angel of the Lord appeared to them, Anonymous Jewish Lord, Not Roman // <i>der Fuhrer</i>	
		and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, Lord (vv.9a, b, 11, 15b), 1:78	
DD		and they were filled with fear. (10) And the angel said to them, Is. 6:1-5 For Fear	
		"Do not be afraid, 7:22, 1:13, 30, 1:32-33 (v.11)	
11		for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to ALL the people ; //2:30-32	
		for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior , Christ the Lord ." 1:32-33, 3 Titles, Is. 9:6, Acts 2:36	
		Emperor's Birthday: Below (9 B.C.)	
		c) v.12 Manger Sign Given By Angel. Invitation To Action, Adventure	
12		And this will be a sign for you: Prophecy/Fulfillment	
		you will find the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Bringer Of Peace, Not Augustus	
		d) vv.13-14 Angels Sing The Meaning/Future Of Salvation Chr.33:3	
13		And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host(army) , Is. 6	
14a		praising God and saying (singing), Angels Sing Of Present & Future	
		"Glory to God (Benefit No. 1) //19:38	
		in the highest, Cosmic Glory To God & Peace From God	
b		and on earth Peace = <i>Shalom, Eirene</i> (4 Dimensions)	
		peace among men (those) with whom he is pleased. (Benefit No. 2) Zech. 1:79	
		(Anthropos <i>eudokias</i> = "men of favor"), 3:22, 12:32, Acts 10:36	
		c') vv.15-16 Manger Sign Confirmed By Obedient Following. Fulfillment	
15		When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Group	
		"Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing which has happened (accomplished word), God Keeps His Word, Initiative Transferred	
16		which the Lord has made known to us." v.12	
		And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. No Mass Hallucination, Angels Are Truth-Tellers	
ND		b') vv.17-19 Angelic Message Shared By Shepherds. Model Evangelists	
17		And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning the child;	
18		And ALL who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. Testimony/Worship/Contemplation	
19		But Mary kept ALL these things (words), pondering them in her heart. //1:66, 2:51b, 8:15, (Reflective)	
		Full Significance Not Yet Clear, Mary As Thinker!	
		a') v.20 Shepherds In The Field. Video + Audio, Model Worshipers	
20		And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for ALL they had heard and seen, Acts 4:20	
		as it had been told them. Revelation, Spiritual Afterglow! Sinners As Evangelists!	
		Most Stop Wrongly At v.20, Misses Jewish Covenant Ceremony	
		1') v.21 JEWISH INITIATION: SIGN OF NAMING FULFILLED (See prophecy of 1:30-31).	
21		AT THE END OF EIGHT DAYS , when he was circumcised, he was called <i>Jesus</i> , Obedience: Gen. 17:11-12, Lev. 12:3	
		the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb . 1:26-38, Inducted Into Covenant, Parent's Faith	

I. LUKE AND THE PERVASIVE ROMAN IMPERIAL THEOLOGY AND PROPAGANDA.

Prience Inscription, Augustus Caesar As World Savior, 9 B.C., Birthday Inscription: “Providence... has brought into the world Augustus and filled him with a hero’s soul for the benefit of mankind. A Savior for us and our descendants, he will make wars cease and order all things well. The epiphany of Caesar has brought to fulfillment past hopes and dreams.”

Myra Inscription: to the “divine Augustus Caesar, son of a god, imperator of land and sea, the benefactor and savior of the whole world.”

Thus, there is proclaimed on the birthday of Caesar (in these and other inscriptions) that he 1) fulfills ancient hopes, 2) is the focus of divine Providence, 3) is son of God, 4) as *Augustus* is worthy of worship, 5) is titled *Savior*, 6) has an epiphany or manifestation, and 7) brings peace to all the world as the 8) benefactor of all. His birthday (Sept. 23) was later made the beginning of the new year. Luke believes that such claims about Augustus are idolatrous, but in Jesus they are all true. Each claims to bring a “gospel about the creation of a peaceful world.” Their means of doing it, however, are not the same. One is through violence and victory, the other through justice and the inbreaking power of God’s kingdom. Jesus gave non-violent resistance. They are rival political and religious claims, then and now. Hitler is not Feuhrer (leader); Jesus is!

II. LUKE AND THE REALITIES OF JEWISH VILLAGES AND CLANS.

Christmas Myths

1. Lonely journey
2. Travel by donkey
3. Late arrival in labor
4. Family as strangers
5. Mean innkeeper
6. Joseph delivers
7. Rejected at birth
8. Manger as wooden cradle
9. Born in a cave

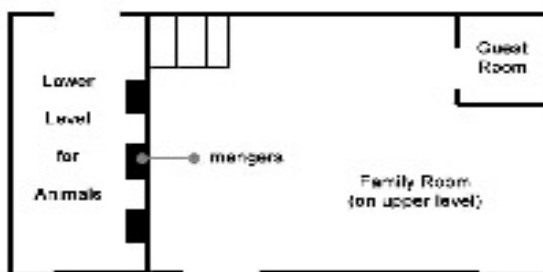
Luke’s Presentation From First-Century Middle Eastern Culture

Regular traffic over a year on the pilgrim road south to Jerusalem.
Don’t know, likely on foot
“And while they were there” implies a more extended stay before labor
Joseph’s ancestral home, many kin, “I am Joseph son of Heli, grandson of Matthat, of the family of David.” Hospitality and tribe are highly valued in that culture.
In house of family members, but not in the guest “upper” room (*kataluma*, 22:11)
Village midwives deliver, as customary in Jewish villages,
Welcomed at birth, rejected later at death.
Manger as place cut out in a stone wall at feeding height for sheep, a niche.
Born in the family room of a village house. The guest room likely on the roof.

Lower level = animals at night

Upper level = family space

Roof = Guest Room (*kataluma*)



Reading the text on the basis of Middle Eastern culture, the story falls into place: Joseph and Mary went to the house of relatives. When the time came for the birth, Mary delivered her firstborn and laid him in a feeding trough. In case anyone should ask why these guests were not in the guest room, Luke says, ‘because there was no room in the guest room.’ Jesus is born, not in a palace, not in his own home in Nazareth, not in the guest room of his relatives’ home, but in the common room of a peasant home in a small town in an out-of-the way corner of the world. Such homes were designed so that the ground floor area just inside the door was used as a place to keep livestock at night. The family lived in an adjacent single room, built a few feet higher. The people would keep it clean by sweeping everything down into the “stable,” and the animals could be easily fed by cutting niches into the edge of the platform that constituted the family’s living space. These niches were the mangers. Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem weeks or days before Jesus’ birth, stayed with tribal relatives, delivered in the family room because the guest room (the “inn”) was occupied- probably by other relatives of higher social status. The angels revealed the birth to shepherds before anyone else and for the very reason that shepherds were a socially disreputable group, much like the grown-ups Jesus would spend much of his time with. Joseph probably took Mary to Bethlehem not because she needed to be physically present for the census, but because she could have been harmed or killed by fellow Nazarenes incensed by her premature pregnancy (Adapted from Kenneth E. Bailey, “The Manger and the Inn: The Cultural Background of Luke 2:7,” *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 4:2:1980).

A Brief Treatment Of Luke 2:1-21

Luke's so-called *Christmas story*, when v.21 is added, stands in parallel to John's birth in 1:57-80. Their conceptions, through different, are parallel (1:5-25//1:26-38), as are their births and early ministries (3:1-22//3:23-4:15). Jesus does not just appear; his is a highly prepared arrival. The surface structure of 2:1-21 is a 9:1 concentric pattern with d. vv.13-14, the song of the angels, at the center (1, 2a-b-c-[d]-c'-b'-a', 1'). The outer narrative components 1. (vv.1-7)//1' (v.21) each contain a major dating, the first geopolitical, the second about Jesus' initiation through circumcision and naming. In both cases prophecy is fulfilled: he is born a Davidid in Bethlehem, and he is called Jesus, the name given to Mary by Gabriel (1:30-31). The central section (2. vv.8-20) is yet a third angelophany (/1:5-25, 1:26-38), this time offering divine revelation to a band of local *unlikelys* to demonstrate the new deal Jesus offers prodigals. The five uses of *all* (vv.3, 10, 18, 19, 20) emphasize that this Jewish Messiah has implication for the whole world.

A pattern emerges. Gabriel comes and goes on divine errands; Zechariah goes on pilgrimage to the temple and back; Mary goes on a pilgrimage to the Judean hill country and back; the holy family goes on pilgrimage to Bethlehem and back, and now the shepherds take a short trek to Jesus' birthplace, then back to work. To be caught up in the work of God, travel is required! Except for trips to the Holy Land *to walk where Jesus walked*, Protestants have largely abandoned pilgrimage as a spiritual discipline, but Scripture- and particularly the birth narratives- are full of such. A pilgrimage is a break from routine that puts one in a liminal state, enabling a fresh openness to God along the way. About every two years I need to leave the U.S. to have my soul *de-toxed* in a mission trip. I go in hope; I return with a new set of eyes. Away from the props and securities of life, I am forced to stay alert to the approaches of God.

Luke paints the story of Jesus' birth against the backdrop of the world's pyramid of power. Caesar proposes; God disposes. The world's true ruler is moved around on a chess board and by providence lands in David's city for his birth. The holy family are not Jewish political radicals but are quietly obedient to the inconveniences of living as an occupied people. Jesus is political in a much larger and more lasting sense. He is born among family and tended by village mid-wives. He sleeps in a feed trough on the lower level of a family house because the guest room on the roof is likely given to older relatives. He was not rejected but welcomed at birth. Mean inn-keepers and late night arrivals in caves are not part of the story.

Romantic notions of shepherds do not match first century Jewish reality. Think *sheep-rustlers* and *unauthorized-grazers* for a more accurate picture. It was to working stiffs on the night watch that the Lord's angel appeared reflected in heaven's light. The telegram from God is that the Messiah has been born close enough for them to find him if they look for the right sign, a bundled baby in a feed trough. What is ultimately for *all people* starts with *some people*, and those are the shepherds. When the heavens open further, the sky is filled with more luminous creatures, all praising God and singing of the new union between God's glory and human welfare. It is to Jesus (3:22) and his followers (12:32) that the promises are made because it is among them and with him that the new arrangements are being practiced at ground level. The church is God's peace laboratory. When heaven zips back shut, the shepherds convene, then go to confirm the sign. Do the sheep that will die at the next Passover go with them? We're not told. The herdsmen eventually find the home and share the revelation that happened on the hillside. Apparently, even God cannot keep a secret this good! The confirmation of prophecy is a cause for joy and reflection all around, with Mary portrayed as a deep thinker on the strange and mysterious events. And, on the eighth day as with all Jewish males, Jesus spills his first blood and is officially made a Jew as the covenant is cut in his flesh. One thing is clear: the human Jesus is expected and has a divine mission.

WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?

“...for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, Christ the Lord.”

Luke's deliberate mix of Jewish and Roman political titles.

In the year 1601, five hundred fifteen years ago, an Italian Catholic priest, explorer, and scientist— Matteo Ricci— became the first European to enter the Emperor of China's *forbidden city*, Beijing. He'd learned the language in the Portuguese colony of Macao. Ricci was savvy and brought along art to illustrate the Christian story. The elite Chinese readily adopted portraits of the Virgin Mary holding her son, but when he produced paintings of the crucifixion and explained that the God-child had grown up only to be executed, they were horrified. They much preferred the Virgin mother and insisted on worshipping her rather than the crucified God.¹

Christmas is culturally much more popular than the weekend of Good Friday and Easter, and we— with the Chinese— often prefer the sentiment of *Madonna Mary* and *Baby Jesus* to her watching him die on a Roman cross and after that the shock of his bodily resurrection and multiple appearances which explain the empty tomb. And for Mary it was personal in a way only mothers understand: the labor and joy of his birth, the years in Nazareth, the horror of his death, the finality of burial, the surprise of resurrection and the gift of his Spirit. How easy to domesticate Christmas and its lead characters; how challenging to embrace the whole story.

Babies wait for no one; they come at their own time. As a kid I delighted in the stories my doctor dad and nurse mom told of delivering babies in hospital elevators, in the back seats of cars, and in the shacks of local sharecroppers. But when labor kicked in for Mary and her first born, they were already in Joseph's ancestral town of Bethlehem for the census, and in such registrations there may have been up to a year to comply, so think of a slow migration rather than masses all at one time.² They

¹ Edited, PreachingToday.com search under Luke 2:1-21. For an outline of Ricci's life, see *Matteo Ricci*, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matteo_Ricci.

² Brook Pearson, "The Lukan Censuses Revisited," *CBQ* 61 (1999), 275.

were housed with kin— think of a family reunion at the old home place. And since the room on the roof of the village house was already taken with higher status family, probably those who were older in a culture that gave age status, it all happened on the main level in the family quarters. The lower level was where animals were brought in at night and fed, thus the feeding trough, which may have been inset into one of the walls or cut into the floor and not freestanding as we imagine ever since Francis of Assisi created the first live manger scene or creche in the year 1224.³

Yes, it smelled like animals and their waste, but that's normal in villages with livestock and so no big deal. It's how life smells, and it was baby Jesus' first odor, and no Fabreeze! I have recently drunk English tea in Kenyan dung huts with animals in the adjoining space. In most of the world life is fragrant, not sanitized.

Did you know that the hippest couple in the universe, Jay Z and Beyoncé, chose Lenox Hill Hospital in Manhattan for the birth of their daughter *Blue Ivy*, born December 4, 2014. A star is born! At \$2,500 a day Lenox offers luxury VIP suites with mahogany walls, hardwood floors, custom linens, a kitchenette, even a concierge to arrange a hairdo, manicure, pedicure and massage. I mean, you do want to look your best when delivering your precious little baby, right?⁴ It ain't just maternity anymore; it's a media event. Can't you just see Blue Ivy on the kindergarten playground in a couple of years. A little boy walks up, "Hey girl, is yo name really a plant that don't exist?" Hurt feelings everywhere, a disappointed little diva.

But Jesus had an everyday name, *Joshua* in Hebrew, just like about every eighth newborn boy in Israel. No finery, no VIP status, unless you consider the angelic choir. Mary was not delivered by angels; Jesus did not pass through her as light through stained glass. She sweated and groaned; he came as a cheezy, bloody, wrinkly little cone head, screaming at the shock of it all, the cord cut and tied, a first attempt at nursing. Mary was tended, as in tribal cultures everywhere, by midwives who brought the birthing stool and helped her along. And, unless it's a complicated delivery— say a breech, they do quite well, but all Bethlehem midwives had lost children, lost mommas, sometimes both, but not this time. Both survived, and there

³ On the details, see Kenneth E. Bailey, "The Manger and the Inn: The Cultural Background of Luke 2:7," *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 4:2, 1980.

⁴ Octavia Drughi, "The 10 Most Expensive Hospitals to Give Birth," *TheRichest.Com* (4-1-14).

was joy in Joseph's extended clan, the city and house of David, the tribe of Judah, the line from which the Messiah was expected to come.

And on the eighth day— as was ancient custom— the wound of Jewish identity was cut in his male flesh. His birth was bloody, his sacrament bloody, his back bloodied by the bite of the lash, his death bloody in five open wounds. Mary risked her life for his, and he labored on a cross for us all. She gave birth to him, and he gave birth to his church. Christianity it not to be sanitized; and where it is to soothe the politically correct and easily offended, it grows weak and insipid. Ours is a bloody religion; it is the red stream of life in the veins of every human being, and there's nothing in this life our great God cannot embrace and transform because in Jesus nothing that is properly human is neglected. This faith is not primarily for your comfort or personal improvement; it's for your salvation and rescue from all the dark forces around and within you that separate you from the life of the Living God, and the stakes are high. *Bloody high*, a Brit might say if he's well into his cups.

So how did they get from Nazareth to Bethlehem? Luke says nothing about a donkey or Mary riding sidesaddle as in medieval art.⁵ As an active young woman, she probably walked the 75 or so miles with Joseph and in the company of others of Davidic ancestry making the same trek to the same village for the same reason. Pilgrimage back and forth for the great festivals in Jerusalem was part of Jewish life, and Bethlehem is just six miles outside the holy city, so the same route is used for the three day walk south. How long they were there before labor we don't know, but Luke did say, "And while they were there," so no late night emergency arrivals.

But there's another level of explanation, and it has to do with imperial decrees down the chain of command to Syria and Galilee. It was the way Rome reminded the world who the Lord was; it was Caesar Augustus who is to be honored and feared,

⁵ "The texts don't mention Mary and/or Joseph riding on a donkey. It is equally plausible— if not more so— that they walked the entire way from Nazareth to Bethlehem (70–80 miles; at least 3 days of steady walking). The idea of Mary riding a donkey stems from a second-century apocryphal work (*The Protoevangelium of James*, chap. 17). Actually, it wouldn't have been unreasonable for a pregnant teenager in antiquity with an active lifestyle to walk such a journey (Andreas Kostenberger, "Five Errors to Drop from Your Christmas Sermon," 12/18/2015, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/december-web-only/five-errors-to-drop-from-your-christmas-sermons).

even worshiped. So go, register, and pay taxes.⁶ Joseph did not rebel, as some Jews did and died, and in the process God used distant decrees so the birth was in the right town to fulfill a promise of Micah the prophet. In the midst of a broken and violent world, God works his purpose through and around human decisions; and if— for just a moment— you glimpsed the current workings of divine providence, it would give great hope. To say *Yes* to Jesus is to move into the center of God’s secret workings, and it is one of our greatest benefits. The mess is not yet cancelled, and in the meantime God’s purposes go quietly and secretly forward. We live in occupied territory, but plans are already being carried out for our full liberation.

Bethlehem shepherds always had work. Pilgrims who could not bring a flawless specimen to Passover each spring purchased one, and they did by the thousands. The work was necessary, but shepherds were not respected because of reputations as rustlers and night grazers on the property of others, a form of theft in a land where every green blade is precious. But, in a moment, the other world breaks into the night shift. “Oh No,” they thought, “we’ve been caught,” and were terrified.

Now the unfolding event came in three layers: first a burst of intense light, then words about a baby with several political titles who they’d soon find wrapped like a newborn but sleeping in an unlikely location. How weird is that? A baby in feed trough. And finally, angels as far as you could see, all singing the same one-verse song, that what glorifies God is good people, and what is good for people glorifies God. In this baby boy, somehow, the two realms of heaven and earth are being rejoined after a long rupture. It was a group vision with an audio track to deliver a dare, “Will you take the hint and go?” And as suddenly as it came, it vanished. Jacob said to Eli, “It’s time to quit rollin’ these blunts. I’m startin’ to see stuff!”

Think truck stop. Think pool hall. Think pickups and good ole boys with ball caps. Think boredom, then terror, then a holy adventure for Jewish sinners who hadn’t been to synagogue recently. And they went, and they found, and they told, and they marveled at the coordination of strange events, while a vulnerable young mother still being fussed over by matrons tries to make sense of it all. We are the visited planet. Someone’s come looking for you. Are you ready to be found? What better time than tonight? Come to his table. Worship him. He’s not longer a babe in a manger, no longer a crucified prophet. He is the risen Lord, and he is among us.

⁶ On the disputed historical issues surrounding the census, see David Garland, *Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 117-119.
