

Christmas Eve Service - 2023 - Luke 2:1-10

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Date: 24 December 2023

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[0 : 0 0] Well good morning church. Merry Christmas. I want to welcome. We have a number of guests and family in town and it's just good to gather and celebrate our Savior this morning together. So this is our morning Christmas Eve service. We only do this sort of thing once every seven years so enjoy it. If you have a copy of the scriptures go ahead and open to Luke chapter 2. We're going to be looking at about the first 10 verses this morning as we try to center our hearts and minds on our Savior. So let me pray for our time and we'll be a little briefer this morning than typical with the children in here but let's try to spend some time and meet with the Lord here. Join me in prayer. Father it's good to gather this morning to begin this week thinking about you. Lord we want to worship you today. We're so thankful for the promise that Isaiah made so many years ago that Jesus you would come and you would be for those that bow their knee to you. They're a wonderful counselor. They're mighty God. They're everlasting father and their Prince of Peace and Lord we need your peace this morning. Father I want to ask that you would remove distraction. Lord I feel even in my spirit just a bit distracted by the season and Lord I want to I want to commune with you this day and I want to pray that for your people here. Lord that we would have opportunity to be refreshed by your presence in our life by your spirit. Father whatever each person needs here this morning I ask that you would provide that. I know there's a range of of emotions and and just status of soul this morning in terms of scarcity and abundance. For some today is a day of great joy and activity with families for others it's a day of loneliness and heartache and and Lord wherever each of us are at would you meet with us and would you minister to us and might we as well today minister to one another. Thank you for the gift of your word that it declares that which is true of you and us and so we say thank you. Would you teach us now as we try to center our hearts that we might meet with you Lord. It's in your name we pray in

Jesus name. Amen. I like to read here from Luke chapter 2 as we consider this story of Christ appearing so beginning in Luke 2 verse 1 it says in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus to all that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Corinius the governor of 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 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 clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the end.

It's probably not a story that is unfamiliar. We typically think about this story this time of year and maybe you've heard this story and and at this point it's it's almost like just phatic speech that you don't even hear anymore but I would just ask us to consider as we hear this narrative to think about it a little bit maybe with more of a critical eye. I think if if you have heard this maybe if for the first time it almost appears as though God is a bit unorganized.

Maybe he's organizationally challenged out of his depth a bit because if you think about what we just read what we have just observed is the maker of heaven and earth not being able to coordinate an event where space is available for his entrance into the world that he created. It's actually quite shocking if you consider it. I mean the entire Old Testament all the way back in the pages of Genesis Genesis 3 15 the promise that that that a Savior would come offspring of a woman to bruise the head of the serpent that that it was promised that the Savior would come. Four thousand years they've been waiting and then on the day when when Jesus makes his entrance it's almost as if God missed his own memo. Imagine if a company was run this way right you've got a big launch for some product and then the day of the launch all of a sudden you know your tech guy shows up and says hey we didn't get the website up we can't do any online orders. What kind of company

would you be? Or man if this was your anniversary and you were taking your wife to a lovely dinner and you show up at the restaurant and and you're like yeah we want that table by the window and they're like sorry you don't have a reservation. I mean your wife is probably not gonna be thrilled that you take her to the drive-thru and even though you try to salvage the night by supersizing it it's probably not the same. And perhaps we're just a little too familiar with this story of the nativity that we really no longer recognize the scandal of what appears to be poor implementation on God's part. I mean just from Luke's narrative alone I've identified three apparent blunders on God's part. There's first this long difficult journey extraneous it appears for this young newlywed couple. Although they're betrothed it's not quite marriage. Mary is with child she is a virgin. The promise of Isaiah 7:14 that that that that a virgin would give birth to the Savior but they have to make this lengthy journey. Additionally you see that when they get to the destination site there's no vacancy on their arrival. They get to Bethlehem and and there's no reservation and henceforth they are without accommodations. And then lastly the Savior of the world is birthed into filth. Jesus is placed in a manger and I think around Christmas time we think of the manger and it's like oh it's just part of the nativity. No a manger is a food trough for livestock and we don't see it anymore. And so there is scandal on this day and and yet what I want us to to to see this morning as we consider this this section of Scripture is that really there's great purpose in the details. In fact Paul said to the Galatians and Galatians 4:4 that when the fullness of time had come God sent forth his son. Paul said it was perfect timing and that's what I want us to come away with this morning as though even though there there is this apparent chaos God is purposeful. He's the God of all providence in the details. I think there's great encouragement for us this morning because many of us live in apparent chaos and to trust and to know that the God of all providence is involved in our very story as he was here on this day the advent of Christ. So let's look at these apparent blunders and consider how God is purposeful in them and the first one is this difficult journey. There was purpose in that. It says here that Caesar Augustus or we know him Gaius Octavius or Octavian from from history he was the adopted son of Julius

[8 : 54] Caesar. He is the Caesar that is recognized as taking Rome from a Republic turning it into an empire and in his day Rome stretched from Spain all the way to Syria from the Atlantic all the way to the River Euphrates. And Octavian required in this day that that the entire Roman Empire was to identify themselves so he called for them to register for a census. Why? So that he could send Christmas gifts? No. So that he could mail a Christmas card? No. He wanted to tax the empire so that he could continue to grow his military and continue to live this opulent lifestyle worthy of a Caesar. And so this young couple they were forced to make a 90-mile trip from Nazareth in Galilee traveling south to Joseph ancestral city of Bethlehem in Judea to register to there for a census. Why go to Bethlehem? Because Joseph was of the line of David.

Mary was of the line of David. And Bethlehem is the city of... those are softballs church. Yeah in fact that is the city where David grew up and we see that in 1 Samuel 16:1. But this journey was a major inconvenience. I would say it was probably arduous. You have a pregnant woman in the third trimester of her pregnancy. Can you imagine Joseph sharing with Mary, hey we're gonna take a little trip. Oh that sounds nice. We're gonna walk for a week. It could have taken upwards of a week to travel whether they were walking or a plush accommodation she had a donkey. I don't think either scenario sounds great.

Probably if you are a pregnant woman in your third trimester. So this was a difficult journey that they undertook. And yet it was all part of God's finely tuned plan. Because what we see is the hand of God moving through the selfish motives of the ruler of the day. Caesar Augustus was the most powerful man alive in his day on planet earth. And he calls for a census to make sure that he's able to expand his kingdom. And he's thinking man this is all about me.

I'm so in charge and yet what we actually figure out is that what he's doing is he's actually fulfilling the very will of God Almighty. Because he's fulfilling a prophecy 700 years prior given by the prophet Micah. And he was unaware of this and yet we see God using the selfish motives of this man to accomplish his will. Caesar he's just a pawn. Micah writes this about 735 to 700 BC somewhere in there. He writes 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.

God had purpose here. It was purpose in this long journey. Because God was going to ensure that his plan comes to fruition. That the Savior the king of planet earth would be born in Bethlehem. And

I love that the prophet declares that a Savior is coming in and because Micah predicts that a Savior is coming he's actually able to end his book his writings with the promise of salvation.

[13:10] And maybe you've never caught this before but in Micah 7 verse 19 he writes he will again have compassion on us. He will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

Church that's gospel language. That's 700 years before Christ even shows up. And Micah saying the Savior that I just talked about in chapter 5 at the end of the book here in chapter 7 salvation is gonna follow.

Church that's why at fourth we teach from one book this book the Bible. There's over 300 prophecies in this book that have been fulfilled in the person of Christ. This is an unusual book. That's why we don't teach from the Quran. There's no prophecies fulfilled in the Quran. Do you know the Quran is so lacking for material that actually Jesus has named five times more than their great prophet Muhammad in their own book? That should startle us a bit the fact that there are prophecies in this book that have been fulfilled. This is a God book.

And that's why we teach from it. It's interesting. A mathematician, scientist, guy by the name of Peter, stoner, he ran the numbers. Instead of taking those 300 plus prophecies fulfilled in the person of Christ, let's just take eight of those. If eight of those prophecies, just eight were fulfilled in Christ, there's 300 plus. But let's just say if there were eight, he ran the numbers and he said the likelihood of Jesus fulfilling eight specific prophecies related to his birth, his life, and then his death and resurrection. Just eight prophecies fulfilled. The odds of that are one in ten to the 17th power. One with 17 zeros. To maybe put it a different way, he used the illustration of the state of Texas and said it's like putting silver dollars across the entire state of Texas, two feet deep. Putting a red X on one of those silver dollars, blindfolding a man, putting him right in the center and saying go walk, pick out that silver dollar. That's how likely it is that

Christ would fulfill just eight. Christ fulfilled 300 plus. There was great purpose for why Mary and Joseph had to make that 90 mile trip. So even though God seemed to not be present, he was managing quite well on this particular evening. Amen. The second apparent blunder on God's part. Jesus arrives. Well, Mary and Joseph arrive and there's no vacancy and there was purpose there. That God chose an overcrowded inn, then a stable, perhaps a cave, but it's an obscure village that Jesus is born in. And it's interesting because God didn't choose Rome, the political capital. He didn't choose Alexandria, didn't choose Athens. He chose Bethlehem. Population tops two to 50. That's 200, not 200,000.

[16:59] This is a town in the middle of nowhere. God entering without pomp, without circumstance, quietly entering the planet that he fashioned and he arrives in a most unremarkable, almost two ordinary way for us to believe. And what I love is that when Christ is born, it's just a foreshadow of when Jesus rides into Jerusalem, his triumphal entry, that Jesus there again does it in a humble way and we're going to read in our study in John that we do typically on Sunday mornings when we get to chapter 12, we'll see that. And by the way, there was a prophecy on that one. In fact, Zechariah 9.9 says, Rejoice greatly, your king is coming to you humble and mounted on a donkey. The prophecies, it's a remarkable church. This book should cause us to shudder a bit.

There's no book on planet earth like the Bible because indeed it's God's word. Well, even the announcement outside of town on this evening, it wasn't given to the nobility. It wasn't given to the important. In fact, if we continue in our story in Luke chapter 2 verses 8 to 10, we read here and in the same region, there were shepherds out in the field keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

There's no vacancy. So Jesus is in a stable in this small town. It's like Jesus arriving. Like if it were our day, Jesus born in Dear Park kind of a thing.

Like what? In the middle of nowhere. Apologize for you, Dear Parkians.

And the announcement, it doesn't come to the important. It comes to shepherd, common, overlooked, this class of individual. Shepherds were nobody in this society. Rabbis in the day considered shepherds, they were religious outcasts.

[19:35] If there was a trial, a testimony by a shepherd wasn't even admitted. This wasn't a profession to be a shepherd, was not a profession that a parent would go and brag to friends about my kid, right? It's not like my kid, they're a software engineer or, you know, they're a fireman or

doctor. Think of any profession other than shepherd. It's the lowest on the social status. They were the lowest here of this society and yet God chose to communicate with the least important about the most important, about the greatest news that the world would ever hear. That joy is possible for all people through Jesus. And that stands today.

Simply recognize your sin, that you're a sinner, and ask Jesus to have mercy on you and you qualify. This news was offered first to shepherds and I think it tells us something profound. That the gospel, it's not for the elite in society, it's for everyone. Church, it's for everyone.

And it isn't just simply joy, because actually the announcement that the angel's made is like, no, it's not just joy, it's actually what? Great joy. So we have gotten it wrong for about a month. Sorry, Dan, no, I think you hung that, you missed the great. I know it would have been a lot more complex, so we're good with this. But it's great joy. It's great joy. You know, there's about 200 references to joy in the Bible. There's less than 10 that refer to great joy.

And they show up on occasion. In Nehemiah, you see great joy talked about when the wall is rebuilt and the exiles return to Jerusalem. In Nehemiah 12, great joy is described. Restoration of the Passover after generations of neglect and Second Chronicles 30, great joy. In the New Testament, in Acts 15, when the Gentiles are included in God's New Covenant people, great joy.

Guess what? Christmas is one of those occasions as well. It is the occasion of good news of great joy. Great joy. And the fact that actually, and we're not going to look at the Magi, but they received the same mail essentially as the shepherds. Luke 2.10 to the shepherds. Matthew 2.10 to the Magi. And they respond to the news with, it says, it's described as great joy. Which means great joy. It's possible for all that Jesus came to rescue. The moms, the dads, the college students, the engineers, the farmers, the doctors, the plumbers, the personal trainers, the baristas. God even came to rescue the pastors. There's great purpose in God's humble beginnings. No vacancy, there was purpose there. And it declares to us that the gospel is for all people. Amen? Well, the third apparent blunder on God's part is the fact that Jesus was born into filth. And yet there was great purpose here as well. That Jesus would be born in a stable. It may have been a cave, but it was all part of God's plan. And I appreciate how Paul states this in 2 Corinthians 8-9 where he writes, for you know that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor.

[23 : 56] So that you, by his poverty, might become rich. All part of God's plan. That Jesus was born into filth. He came in such a way to let us know what he was about that he wasn't here for his own comfort, but rather he was here for rescue. One pastor writes this about his life. It says, of Jesus he began life in a manger and ended life on a cross and in between had nowhere to lay his head. Jesus could have been born into a wealthy family, but God didn't send him for comfort. Church he sent him for rescue. And I would just suggest that Bethlehem is the perfect town for Jesus to be born into. Town in the middle of nowhere. Bethlehem actually, if you translate it, it comes from two Hebrew words. It actually means house of bread. Why does it name that? Because in Bethlehem it was an agrarian town. There was pasture land. There was farmland. And there was grain. And so there was great bread there. And I think there's a foreshadowing of the fact that Jesus arrived, Savior of the world, and then he declares, we're going to see in our study in John 6, I am the bread of life. Bethlehem makes sense that that's where he arrives. Bethlehem is actually known for two key things. That's the first one.

They were known for their bread. Secondly, it was also the town in which sheep were raised for sacrifice in nearby Jerusalem. And isn't that cool that Jesus arrives in the place where the sacrificial animals are raised, where he is the perfect sacrifice? And in fact, we've already seen it declared of him in John 1, where John the baptizer says, hey, behold the Lamb of God. And so in fact, that Jesus was born into filth at the end of his life, dies on a cross. It tells us something life changing. It actually tells us this about God, that God is not a God who hides from the dirty stuff that avoids. In fact, it says that God doesn't divert himself from the dirty, from the suffering, from the hurting, rather he enters into it. And he declared that on the day of the nativity of his arrival.

Evil in our day church, it doesn't actually make God irrelevant. We don't need a new message. We need an old message. We need good news of great joy. In fact, the fact that life is dark and our days are evil, it actually reminds us that the Gospel is more relevant than it's ever been. That the promise of Christmas, God is offering us all a pathway through suffering. And ultimately, there is joy amidst the suffering and there is, as the angel declared to the shepherds, great joy today, but there's great joy at destinations end at our reunion. And that's actually what is so beautiful about

this announcement. That great joy of Christmas will translate into great joy at either Christ coming or our appearing before him. And in fact, we have it described that way. Because in Jude verse 24, it says this, now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless, check it, before the presence of his glory, we are now appearing in God's very presence. It says before the in the presence of his glory, it says with what? With great joy. With great joy. And that's the promise of

of Christmas. That despite the trial, despite the heartache, despite the suffering, and there is much of it in these days, there is a pathway through it. Is it joy? No.

It's great joy. Be encouraged, church. Because if God was purposeful on this day, when it seemed that everything was out of control and nothing, the dots weren't connecting man, he was very in control. He is the God of providence then. He's a God of providence in your life today. Amen. Which pray with me. Lord, we love to be reminded that you are a God that's involved in the details. Even when the apparent details don't make sense in our minds, maybe in the moment. Lord, we're so thankful that you were purposeful, that you fulfilled this prophecy given 700 years prior. And Lord, you taught us things even in the circumstance of how you arrived in the darkness, in the filth, even that there was no vacancy for you. Lord, we love that you remind us through Christmas that you're a God that did not avert Himself from suffering. That indeed, you have declared to us that you are Emmanuel, that you are God with us. In the highs and the lows, in the difficult, in the times of celebration. Lord, we love the fact that you're a God that did not avert Himself from suffering. And Lord, for those that have bowed their knee to you, indeed, you are our wonderful counselor, our mighty

[29 : 54] God, our everlasting Father. And Lord, thank you that you are our Prince of Peace. How desperate we are for your presence today. Would you refresh us with it? Lord, if there's some here that have never heard what Christmas is about, that they've never understood that that God would send Himself in the person of Christ to be the Savior of the world, to die for sinners, that we could have life and we could experience great joy forever. I pray today would be a day where they would bow their knee to you and cry out to you because Lord, is a trustworthy statement that you came into this world not for comfort, but rather to rescue and to die for sinners. And we celebrate that today. See your wonderful name Jesus we pray.

All God's people said, Amen.