

God is still on His Throne

Luke 2:8-20

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I was recently at a Christmas event that our church hosted. It was a great event. Many people were involved. Money was raised for missions in Africa. Many people brought friends who had never been to our church. It was a great Christmas event done in the spirit of Christmas . . . But at one point, towards the end of the night, someone came to me with a small boy, probably around 4 years old, who was crying uncontrollably. I thought to myself, “what horrific thing must have happened to this child to cause him to cry like this?!” As I talked to the child and the volunteer who had brought him to me, I realized that amongst all the noise, and all the lights, and all the people in the crowd, he had gotten lost. His family was visiting our church for the first time and he had no idea where he was or where his parents were. In his little mind he had lost everything that mattered, and he was horrified.

Don't worry. In a few minutes we found his parents and the situation was solved. From our adult perspective it was not that big a deal. Everything was fine the whole time. But for this little boy, losing his parents turned his whole world upside-down.

It is not that different than us many times. We get into financial troubles. We experience broken relationships. We lose a job or get hurt or sick. We get humiliated, discredited or sinned against. Our hearts are broken or our dreams are smashed on the rocks. We just can't seem to win and we feel so lost . . . just like the little boy at the Christmas event. And it seems that all we can do is cry out with inconsolable tears of fear and loss.

As we start today, I want you to know that if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, you are not lost. You are not forgotten. Your heavenly Father has not set you aside to work with someone else who is more important. You may feel lost. You may even feel that all is lost, but please here me say, your heavenly Father, the King of the Universe, still sits on His throne, and He invites you to ***“draw near to the throne***

of grace, that you may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:16) Be encouraged. The King is still on the throne.

We see this truth on display throughout the Christmas story. In Luke 2:1-20, we find the familiar Christmas story, but I would like us to dig a little more deeply as we recount this story once again.

We see in Luke 1:1-4 that Luke’s stated goal of writing was, *“To write an orderly account of the many things which have happened among us, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.”* In the book of Luke, Luke is incredibly detailed, not just in His recount of the events of Jesus’ life, but also in all the historical details of location, time and people. Archaeologists and historians have agreed in the excellence of Luke’s work. This gives us even more confidence in his writings in regards to Jesus.

In Luke 2:1-3 it says this:

“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.”

Many times we read these first three verses and then quickly move along to what we think is the more important part of the story. We need to be careful. Many times, in our hurry to “get to the good part” we pass right by precious truths of the scripture.

Caesar Augustus was the first emperor of Rome. He was both a great military leader and also a master administrator. Under his guidance the Roman Empire stretched from Britain to India. His real name was Gaius Octavius. Caesar was more of a title. Eventually, he was also given the title *“Augustus”* by the Roman senate. Until this point in Roman history, this word had only been used to describe the gods.

He was the great nephew of Julius Caesar. At the time of Julius Caesar’s assassination, it was found out that Julius Caesar had recently adopted Gaius Octavius as his son and that he was Julius Caesar’s choice to be his heir. The Roman senate would eventually vote and declare that Julius Caesar was a god. Gaius Octavius’ eventual name became *Imperator Caesar Divi Filius Augustus*. *Divi Filius* means “son of God.” In addition, at that time, in the Roman Empire some even referred to him as *Caesar Augustus*, “savior of the world.” This savior, supposed son of god, was being worshipped in Rome, while the true Savior of the World and Son of God was being born in a manger in a small town named Bethlehem.

Luke mentions the name Caesar Augustus and his census to add to the historicity of the story, to show its role in fulfilling messianic prophecies, and to give testimony to the sovereignty of God as all things are brought together to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.

Caesar Augustus had no idea that his decision to register the people was being initiated by the Spirit of God to do exactly what needed to be done, in line with the messianic prophecies. Julius Caesar, in all his grandeur, was nothing more than a tool or a pawn in the hand of God. It may seem at times that Caesar Augustus, Trump, Sánchez, Putin, Netanyahu, or even your boss is in the seat of control, but it is not true. God, alone, is on the throne.

The Romans registered the people for two reasons. The first was to find those who could serve in the military. The Jews however were exempt from military service. The second purpose was that of registering their names, properties and jobs, for the sake of taxation.

The Jews hated the Roman taxation and the way that the Romans lorded over them, but at the same time this particular census was bringing about the sovereign will and timing of God. This census, decreed by a godless emperor, would be used to usher in the promised Messiah. **How many times have we been confused or frustrated by something that we later found out was a tool in God's hand?** Poverty that helped us know God as the Provider. Confusion that allowed us to experience Christ as the Almighty Counselor. Betrayal that allowed us to learn the meaning of forgiveness. Does scripture not teach us that God is working all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose, and that this is being done to conform us to the image of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:28-29)? God is always working (John 5:17). Be encouraged. Even in the most difficult of days God is working in our world and in our lives. No matter what today or tomorrow brings, our God is still on the throne.

The story then continues into verse 4 and 5 with these words:

“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.”

Luke was linking this newborn baby to the prophecies so his readers would have confidence that the Christ child was truly the promised Messiah. This town of Nazareth was also referred to in Matthew 2:23, ***“And He went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.”*** Bethlehem, the city of David, is noted as the birthplace of the Messiah in Micah 5:2. This prophecy would have been written over 700 years before Christ was born. As seen in Matthew 1, in the genealogy of Jesus Christ, Joseph was a descendant of David as would be the Messiah (Isaiah 9:6-7; Jeremiah 33:14-15, 17; 1 Chronicles 17:11-14; Isaiah 11:1-3; Hosea 3:5). Finally, Luke lists Mary, who he had already been introduced to the story in Luke 1. She was a virgin, but yet was pregnant. We see this prophesied in Isaiah 7:14: ***“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”*** Luke brings the prophecy and this young girl together when he talks of her being visited by the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:30-35).

The virgin birth was necessary. This babe would be both God and man. In this way mankind would finally be able to understand what God is like as they watch the life of Jesus, the Son of God, who took on the form of a man. We now could see the invisible God. In the words of Jesus, ***“If you have seen me, you have seen the Father”*** (John 14:9). Another reason that Jesus had to be fully God and fully man was because our sins against an eternal God deserve eternal punishment that could only be paid for by the death of one who is eternal. The virgin birth is an essential part of the story. Be careful not to discard it because it seems illogical.

Joseph was a descendant of King David, so they had to register in the city of Bethlehem, the city of King David. From Nazareth to Bethlehem it is 156 kilometers. That is about as far as Madrid is to Toledo. That

would be a walk of about 32 hours, if you figure walking speed like google maps does. That is a long walk, especially with a wife who is expecting a child.

Mary and Joseph were many kilometers from home. No hospital. No experience. Traveling during pregnancy. Carrying the Hope of the world in her womb. They must have felt so much pressure and desperate need, yet they found this all-powerful God to be faithful, every step of the way, just like He is for us. Here we find, once again, the intersection of the need of man and the faithfulness of God. As Mary and Joseph obeyed the will of God they found themselves in the center of His provision. It is the same for us. Will we trust and obey? Stepping out in faith is often fearful, but it is in that place of total dependence that we find God. In the midst of the struggles and the unknowns, God is still on the throne.

“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.”

In these two verses, we find Luke’s simple description of one of the greatest events that ever occurred. The focus was meant to be kept on the significance of the coming of the Christ child, not the drama that we have created around the story.

While they were there, “the time came” for her to give birth. While this does include the timing of labor pain and actual birth, it encompasses even more than that. It was not just any time. As Galatians 4:4 describes it, ***“in the fullness of time God sent forth His Son.”*** This verse could also be translated, “When God had everything prepared, God sent His son.” Here are some examples:

In Genesis we see sin enter into the world. Mankind is cut off from God. God begins setting a plan in place that would rescue His people. God’s greatness is seen as he gives promises and prophecies talking of a coming Messiah. God works throughout the Old Testament relating to the Jews in a way that helps us understand what the Messiah would be like and how salvation would be offered to us. God directs the hearts of kings, brings victory and defeat, brings revival, and disciplines idolatry. He works corporately and individually preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah.

In the second half of the Old Testament, Israel rebelled against God by worshiping idols. God disciplined them by being conquered and taken away to a foreign land. During this exile, Israel was cut off from the temple. Under these circumstances, the exiles turned their religious focus from what they had lost to what they retained –Judaism became a faith that could be practiced wherever God’s Word could be carried. The emphasis was on personal holiness and a relationship with God, instead of ritual and location. This prepared the way for the Christian gospel.

God even worked during the four hundred years between the Old and the New Testament. During this time, God added no new revelations to scripture. It was as if it was a testing time to see if God’s people would be obedient to what God had already told them, before He would tell them more.

During this time between the Old and the New Testament, Alexander the Great came to power. He was a ruler from Macedonia, a northern part of Greece. He and his armies conquered the nations from

Greece all the way to India. This included Jerusalem and the Jews (332 B.C.). Alexander was committed to the creation of a world united by the Greek language and culture. By the time he died, most of that part of the world spoke Greek. Everyone in that part of the world speaking the same language made it easier for the gospel to spread years later, when Christ came. Greek is clearer and more exact than many languages. This made it a great language for the New Testament to be written in, so that future translators could better understand the message that God was trying to communicate to all people.

In the years after Alexander the Great, the Jews were treated brutally, but eventually won their freedom for a short time. This was followed by the coming of the Roman Empire. The combination of past freedom and present oppression fueled their longing for the Messiah. Even in the midst of these trials, God was still preparing the way for His Son's arrival. The Romans built over 4,000 kilometers of highways and established what was known as the *Pax Romana*. This Roman Peace was a period of unrivaled power that allowed there to be peace across the empire. These roads and this time of peace would allow the gospel to be spread more easily during the years of the early church, after Christ had returned to heaven. God continued to display His greatness as He prepared the way for Christ's coming.

I grew up attending public schools. I learned history at school and Bible at church on Sunday. They seemed like two separate topics, but when we begin to study history with our Bible in hand, we once again see that God is sovereign over all things and is moving this world to its God-ordained end. God was and is still on His throne.

Verse 7 says, ***"And she gave birth to her firstborn son."***

The baby Jesus was Mary's "firstborn" son. The Bible tells us there were more children born later. Mark 6:3 says, ***"Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?"*** Mary was not a virgin all of her life, as some would have us believe. There is no biblical support for this belief and no theological reason to not take the words of Mark 6:3 literally.

Mary gave birth to Jesus, but we must realize that the Son of God was not created in that moment. Yes, at that moment He took on the form of man as we see in the scriptures, but the Son of God had always existed, as we see in John 1:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men . . . ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."

Christmas does not celebrate the beginning of the Son of God. It is the celebration of the eternal Son of God becoming a man, so that we could be saved. The Father, the Son and the Spirit have always been and will always be. The birth of Christ is the entrance of the Son of God into our world as a man.

These verses end with Luke recording that Jesus was laid in a manger. This is only fitting for a God who does not value the superficial accolades of this world. When many expected a prince and a palace, God gave them a babe in a manger. **How many have missed the Savior because they were looking for something totally different?**

As we hear this story once again, may God give us eyes to see and ears to hear the wonder of the Christmas story and the simplicity of the Savior who invites us to come and follow Him. May we see that this gospel took place in the real world, for sinners and saints who live in a real world. Jesus came to save the sick and reconcile us to God.

The story continues in Luke 2:8-14:

“And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.’ ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!’”

It is surprising that the story should tell that the first announcement of God came to some shepherds. Shepherds were despised by the religious people of the day. They were quite unable to keep the details of the ceremonial law; they could not observe all the meticulous religious hand-washings and rules and regulations. They could not always honor the sabbath. Their flocks made far too constant demands on them; and so the religious people looked down on the shepherds as an unclean, sinful people. It was to these simple men of the fields that God's message first came.

The message that the angel proclaimed was news that would drastically change their view of everything else around them. It would now be the lens through which they would view everything else.

The proclamation of the angel was more than information to be merely acknowledged. It was an invitation to relate to Christ in these ways, as our Savior and our Lord.

The host of angels then joined in and proclaimed, ***“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”*** They were proclaiming the greatness of God that they were personally familiar with. In the spiritual realm they were eyewitnesses of the ultimate glory of God.

They then proclaimed the gift of peace that was coming to mankind through Christ. This is not promising an end to all fighting or arguments or strife. It is bigger than that. It is a peace with God that will permeate all of life for those who trust in Christ. The Romans offered a *Pax Romana*, established through fear and military power. Christ came to grant an inward peace to which mankind has no access. The message of the angel was truly of a personal God who was drawing near to the very people whom He had created.

In Luke 2:15-20 the story continues:

“When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.’¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

The shepherds had heard the message of the angels and it was now their time to respond. With haste they went to Bethlehem to find this Savior of which they had been told. And they found him exactly as the angels had said. God had drawn them to Himself. They had experienced the reality of God and the only possible response was to glorify and praise God.

It is interesting how God proclaimed His son’s birth to those who had eyes to see and ears to hear: Mary, the young, god-fearing mother of Jesus. Joseph the honorable, simple carpenter. The peaceful, simple shepherds, sitting quietly in the countryside. The wisemen who were actively seeking a king. And still He comes today revealing Himself to those earnestly seek Him, those who have ears to hear, eyes to see and hearts that believe. Today, will you come near to our God, who sits on His throne and invites each of us to draw near?

Discussion Questions

1. What from this sermon did you find most interesting?
2. As a child can you remember ever being lost and not being able to find your parents? It is a horrible experience. To a small child his or her parents are everything. To lose your parents feels like all is lost. Has there ever been a time that you felt some of these same emotions as an adult?
3. How many times have you been confused or frustrated by something that you later found out was a tool in God’s hand?
4. Many have missed the Savior because they were looking for something totally different. In today’s world what are people trusting in to be their savior?
5. What from this lesson do you need to remember?
6. What does God want you to do about it before the next time that we meet?
7. How can we pray for you?