

Luke 2:1–20
Christmas Eve
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
December 24, 2023

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

The Christmas story from Luke 2 is an important piece of literature throughout the world. It shows up in German and English textbooks, for example, as a piece of our cultural heritage. Perhaps no story is better known than this one. Long before “’Twas the Night Before Christmas” or “A Christmas Carol,” Luke 2 was *the* story for this holy night. It’s been heard every year for generations, as children sit at the feet of their parents, or as parents watch their children recite the story in a Christmas pageant, or as we hear it proclaimed to us in church every Christmas Eve.

Luke 2 has all the trappings of a great play. Luke chapter 1 gives us the backstory. We heard much of that at our midweek Advent services this year. Then the main characters, Mary and Joseph, have to leave their hometown of Nazareth to go back to Joseph’s ancestral town of Bethlehem, to be registered in the census like everyone else. As far as the plotline, there’s good conflict: no room in the inn. Mary must give birth to the star of the show, the Savior of the world, in the place where animals live. But there’s resolution. The angels of heaven announce the birth to the lowly shepherds on earth. And all who heard about what happened wondered at what the shepherds told them. And the shepherds returned to their fields, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Everything about the narrative of Luke 2 sounds like a play. People are drawn to such a powerful story. And yet, it’s also more than a story. The Christmas story is also history. The name Caesar Augustus sets us in a certain historical period of the Roman Empire, the pax

romana, a time of relative peace. Caesar Augustus ushered in this age of peace that lasted nearly two hundred years. Freedom from both internal and external conflict allowed good road and sewage systems to be built. Roman territory and population were expanding. The time in history had fully come for God to send forth His Son, born of woman.

Part of building and maintaining an empire is knowing how many subjects you have, mainly for tax purposes. That's why Caesar Augustus decreed a census of his empire, undertaken locally by Quirinius, the Roman governor of the province of Syria. Today, governments carry out censuses for the same reasons: to determine tax rates and political boundaries, and to get a sense of the population. Since 1790, the United States government has carried out a census every ten years. These records are a gold mine for genealogy research in the United States. In Europe, the best records are still the old church books, where baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals are recorded. That's where people look to get a sense of who they are and how their family history ties into world history. In the moment, it's nothing more than writing down some names and dates, but for future generations this information gives a sense of who we are, where we've come from, and where we're going. Genealogy is what connects you to history.

Now we just fill out a form online or mail it in. But back then, each family would have to return to its ancestral town. Joseph was a descendant of King David, so he and Mary journeyed from Nazareth in Galilee back to the little town of Bethlehem, in Judea, where King David originally came from. The contrast is striking. King David was only outdone in wealth and wisdom by his son, King Solomon. And Solomon was the king of peace who ushered in his own kind of pax romana: "he had peace on all sides around him" (1 Kings 4:24). Yet empires come and go, as we see from the Scriptures and from history. Nations and rulers rise and fall in a continuous cycle until the end of time. The Lord casts down the mighty from their thrones and

exalts those of humble estate. Joseph returned to his ancestral town of Bethlehem because he was of the house and lineage of David. But Joseph was not a king. The Davidic dynasty had long since exited the political stage. Joseph was just a lowly carpenter living among Gentiles in Galilee. There were no relatives to stay with in Bethlehem, and no room in the inn. So much for being a descendant of kings! Joseph, Mary, and the baby to be born don't look so much like a royal family, but like an impoverished peasant family. So the course of history goes. In the end, it matters very little who your ancestors were. After just a few generations everything changes. Royals become paupers and paupers become royals.

Of course, King David also had humble origins a thousand years earlier. David was not born into a royal family, but into a family of shepherds. The LORD had rejected Saul from being king over Israel and instead sent the prophet Samuel to the house of Jesse in Bethlehem. Samuel saw the oldest son of Jesse and thought: "Surely this is the Lord's anointed one." But the Lord said to Samuel: "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Sam 16:7). The seven oldest sons were rejected for the kingship, but David, the eighth and youngest son, was chosen. God cast out mighty Saul and raised up humble David. So the Christ child with his family back in Bethlehem is more like his ancestor, King David, than what we see on the surface. He is the royal son, born in humility but destined to be ruler over all.

It's not an accident of history that Jesus was born at the time when He was and at the place where He was. From God's perspective, there are no accidents of history. "When the time had fully come, God sent forth His Son." The Second Person of the Holy Trinity was waiting in the background, waiting offstage to make His grand appearance in this pageant, not as a king of

this world with pomp and majesty, but as a little baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. He came in humility that He might one day die in humility and then be glorified at the right hand of God the Father, with the glory He had with God the Father before the world existed (John 17:5).

Even the journey to Bethlehem to take part in the census wasn't a coincidence. God predetermined the location for the birth, the hometown of lowly David who would become king, for the birth of the lowly Christchild, who is the Lord of all. In the prophecy of Micah, chapter 5, written 300 years after David and 700 years before the birth of Christ, the people of God knew to expect a lowly ruler like David to be born in lowly Bethlehem: "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 . . . and He shall stand and shepherd His flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD His God. And they shall dwell secure, for now He shall be great to the ends of the earth. And He shall be their peace." God knew He would become man to rule over His people, to be the Good Shepherd that lays down His life for the sheep by dying on the cross, and so to establish a Kingdom of peace that would last into eternity. God gave His people hints ahead of time, through the prophets, that they might know when these things would come to pass. On this most holy night, all those prophecies of old came to fulfillment.

God orchestrated everything in the past to work together for the good of those who love Him, for those who have been called according to His purpose. It is God who arranges the events of salvation history and of all history, the events of the past, the present, and the future, like a playwright. He had everything ready to go. And then the playwright Himself entered the production. He came on stage to play the most important role. In humility, God became man that

He might humbly die on the cross for your sins, and then rise from the dead to live and reign in eternity. It was part of His plan the whole time. On this night, we celebrate that God entered His creation to redeem His creation from sin, death, and the power of the Devil. The time had fully come. The life and ministry of Jesus had commenced. From the manger in Bethlehem it was a clear path forward to to the cross, and then to resurrection and the new creation.

God orchestrated all the events of salvation history (and the events of all history) to bring everything together at the perfect moment for when He would enter this world. That's how God orchestrates everything in your life, too. From our small, human perspective, so much looks accidental. So much of our lives looks like chance, like we've lucked out or like we've struck out. But God doesn't work that way. His gracious provision is at work in all of our lives, in our genealogies, in our life stories, in the ups and downs of our daily existence, for our eternal good, for our salvation in Jesus Christ. The steps we take, wherever they might take us, are from the Lord, even if we don't understand in the moment why God has put us right here and right now (Prov 20:24).

As Shakespeare famously writes: "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely Players." All history is a pageant and you are part of the story because Jesus makes you part of His story. The Son of God was born in history to redeem you, that you might be adopted as sons of God in Holy Baptism. At the baptismal font He inscribed your name in the Book of Life, in the cast of characters for this pageant of salvation history. Clothed in flesh, He came to earth to give His flesh and blood into death for you, to give His flesh and blood for you to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of your sins. As we'll sing in one of Luther's Christmas hymns tomorrow morning, in the manger, "we see God's Son from eternity, the gift from God's eternal throne here clothed in our poor flesh and bone." God became one of us that we might live with

Him forever when the production is over. “The very Son of God sublime entered into earthly time to lead us from this world of cares to heaven’s courts as blessed heirs.” There He reigns for all eternity as the true King of Peace. Therefore, all Christendom, rejoice and sing His praise with endless voice. Alleluia! In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.