

Dear Friends,

Thank you, Carol McClellan, Teddy McClellan, Nathaniel McClellan, and Kaleb Green for the fantastic Christmas Program. It was the greatest one I have ever seen. Wow! You can catch it on Facebook and it will be up soon on our website.

As we approach Christmas with the Omicron and Delta variants raging, I urge you to take care of yourself and be safe. It will take an extra bit of caution and mindfulness, but we can do it. And we don't have to do it alone. We have each other. So please continue to touch base and hold each other in prayer. And remember it is the season of Emmanuel, God with us.

Our plan is to have our annual meeting on the last Sunday in January and the Ordination and Installation of Elders and Deacons on the first Sunday in February. Doug Cashing has agreed to serve as an elder. And we wish to thank Susan Garmon for her faithful and dedicated service during these most difficult times.

This is the beautiful, beloved, simple, sacred story of Christmas that we love. I will read in church next Friday evening. It has been my tradition not to preach on Christmas Eve, as I think the story is so powerful that nothing more needs to be added. But I did want to share with you some of the background that can open it up for us to hear what Luke is trying to tell us.

This is not Luke's intent to write history or prove anything, but to declare the wondrous birth of Jesus.

(Below are my notes they appear *italics*.)

Luke 2:1-20

1 And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.

2 (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)

*Caesars and governors, census, and taxation are used to remind us that God's activity does not take place in some ethereal dimension, but right in the middle of life. It also reminds us that the focal point is not Rome and the Pax Romana. Basically, peace is enforced by military might, occupation, and oppression. So this census is just another form of harassment for occupied people where Rome's might and presence were an everyday reality that colored all of their existence.*

3 And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)

*Caesar would think they began this arduous 70 plus mile journey because he said so. But there is more to it.*

*Tradition held that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem, but Mary and Joseph were in Nazareth. So Caesar doesn't realize that rather than being in charge, he is being used by God to get the Holy Family to Bethlehem. Maybe they sang "O Little Town of Olean" as they traveled.*

5 To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

6 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

*It doesn't matter that this teenaged girl is about to give birth. She must make the trip as well. Luke doesn't spend much time with labor and delivery, which is dangerous for mother and child. Moreover, this was probably not what one might call a silent night.*

7 And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

*Maybe you have heard this before, but there is no Holiday Inn with an innkeeper saying no vacancy. The word in Greek that is translated inn means upper guest room. (The same word is used for upper room for the Last Supper Luke 22:1-13). (And is different from the word for an inn in the Good Samaritan Luke 10:25-37.) So Jesus was born in a home of his relatives.*

*There is no way Joseph's family would have turned them away. They were family. And to accommodate the birth, they just said come on in. There is always room for the family, even if we must crowd together. This is a story of great hospitality rather than rejection.*

*The need for privacy is a modern concern of ours, not the Jewish peasant. When Jesus was born, he was likely placed in a feed trough. This would have been the trough that the family animals used when they were brought in for the night.*

*In addition, the manger/feed trough imagery reminds us to look for Jesus in unexpected places. Not just in the extraordinary, but the ordinary. And in the high but especially in the low points of our life.*

8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

*These shepherds appear to us every Christmas Eve and no other time. These quite ordinary folks are the first people to about Jesus's birth. To oppressed and depressed people, God sends a message of hope just where it is needed. While shepherds may have been looked down on by some, they were often held in esteem for their rugged, arduous work, and indeed the word used for God and kings. So shepherd signifies everyday folks and God's chosen leader who was supposed to honor God and care for the people.*

*They weren't necessarily poor. We recall the words "to certain poor shepherds." Notice they are looking after their sheep, their own sheep. I think the image reminds us that shepherds were everyday folks, not the powers that be.*

9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

*And to these everyday folks, the angels appear. And God comes to them, not in the glorious, majestic temple, but as they are. God shows up at their workplace. Now as great as it might be to hear from God, it had to be terrifying as well as blessed.*

10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

*This is a common theme in the story of Jesus at birth and at the resurrection. Fear not. Not that God will intervene and keep us safe, but God will be with us whatever comes to us. This indeed is good news. We are not alone. This is different from the idea of good news in Roman Culture.*

*Good news is coming to you, to all people. When the term good news was heard in Roman culture, it would be used to describe the activities of Augustus and even his birth.*

*For Luke, it is not Augustus birth but Jesus' that is good news.*

11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

*A savior is born to us and for us. One who will bring us home to God and grant peace to our spirit.*

*And herein lies the rub. If Jesus is the Saviour, God's anointed Augustus or any Caesar is not the Saviour. And Augustus was proclaimed savior and God's son. To which Luke says, wrong. And Luke is telling us to look not to the might of Rome for God to act but in a small house in Bethlehem. God's decisive act begins in total vulnerability a helpless child in a cattle trough. Jesus is God's son, savior of the world. And Caesar is merely another child of God.*

*But in this child, God invites us to come closer check this baby out. For in him is hope, something that may be in short supply. For it is here that God makes quiet entry into human life our life.*

12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

*Go check it out. That invitation rings out across the ages. Check out this Jesus.*

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, goodwill toward men.

*God is bringing peace, not Caesar. This is more than the great Pax Romana. It is the Pax Christus. This verse has many translations, and the question is who God is pleased with. And the best answer all humanity, you and me. All of us. It may be hard to realize that God regards us with goodwill and wishes peace for all of us, and offers us a path to that peace*

15 And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

*They were excited this encounter with the holy stirred them up. The Good News of Great joy propels us to look for signs of it in our lives. What would it take for God to stir our hearts? Maybe the trustworthy good news is that we are treasured, loved, and forgiven.*

16 And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

*So they checked it out, and they found what they had been told they would find. The holy family welcomed the Shepherds into the home to see this newborn child. This may be a little strange to us, but a swaddled child would have been quite ordinary. So in this ordinary child, they found a double miracle that Jesus was as they had been told and that he was a peasant, one of them.*

17 And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.

18 And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

19 But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.

*And here is the word for us let us ponder what the birth of Jesus means to and for us.*

20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

*They returned home rejoicing. And now life is both the same and changed forever. They have encountered the holy and take that encounter into their daily lives. So may we have the same experience.*

I hope this deepens your love for this classic story of God coming to us in love.

I wish you all a Blessed Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Pastor Bruce