

Sermon Brief

Andre Riendeau

December 11, 2022

Text: Luke 2:1-7

Title: “Making Room”

Subject: Jesus is born in Bethlehem.

Complement: Prophecy is fulfilled amidst tremendous irony.

Textual Idea: Jesus is born in Bethlehem in ironic fulfillment of prophecy.

Sermon Idea: God brings about His eternal purpose in a surprisingly earthy way.

Interrogative: Have you made room for Jesus in your heart?

Key Points:

Contrast #1: Caesar Augustus, Roman Emperor vs. Jesus Christ, Poor Infant – make room for Jesus’ kingship in your life.

Contrast #2: Human Decrees vs. God’s Decrees – make room for seeing the hand of God in your daily circumstances.

Contrast #3: The World Stage vs. The Private Home – make room for “Jesus” in your home/life.

What do I want people to know? I want people to know that Jesus is the only Savior and Lord of the world. I want them to know that God is at work even in the ordinary, earthy parts of life.

What do I want people to do? I want people to (1) make Jesus their King, (2) seek to see God’s hand in their ordinary circumstances, (3) open their hearts and homes to “Jesus.”

What need am I addressing? I am addressing the need for making Jesus the center of our lives.

“Making Room”

Luke 2:1-7

December 11, 2022

Our theme for this Christmas season is **(LCD) Come Home**. We chose this theme because we want everyone to know that there's room for them here. We want you to come seek Jesus with us. That stands in opposition to the common picture of Christmas as in this image. The story is usually told that Joseph and Mary were turned down by everyone in Bethlehem and ended up going through childbirth in a stable – all alone and unwelcome. In other words, Bethlehem did not make room for Jesus. I'm not sure that's true. So let's take a fresh look at the familiar Christmas story and see if Bethlehem did or did not make room for Jesus. As we do, I'd like you to be thinking about your own heart. Is there a **(LCD) no vacancy sign on it? Have you made room for Jesus in your heart?** Let's take a look. Please turn to the gospel of Luke, chapter 2.

Now let me make a quick comment about our context, the gospel of Luke. Let's be honest. Some of us are more touchy-feely, intuitive, spiritually oriented people while others of us are more intellectual, apologetic, reason oriented. I'm not saying that to put one above the other – I'm just recognizing differences between us. The 'touchy-feely' people tend to love the gospel of John which is highly relational and profoundly deep spiritually. The 'intellectual, apologetic' types tend to love the gospel of Luke because, well, he was one of them! Luke's a doctor, a historian. He's a Dragnet, “nothing but the facts” kind of guy while John is out there spiritualizing things! Both good, but different.

With that in mind, we're looking at Luke this morning. He's telling the history of Jesus' life and teaching in a very no-nonsense way. There's no flowery description of the birth of Jesus here! It's just nuts and bolts! So I'm going to take Luke on his terms to start...a very factual approach. After that, I'll put on John's robe and talk about the spiritual significance of all these factoids! Okay? So let's start with our detective hats and observe the facts of Jesus' birth. Luke 2, verse 1, *“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to their own town to register. 4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.”*

Luke begins in the first two verses by giving us the historical setting Jesus is born into. It is when Caesar Augustus issued a census of the entire Roman world. He adds that it was the first census conducted while a guy named Quirinius, I'll call him Q, was governor of Syria. Okay, who are these guys and why does this all matter? First, **(LCD) look at a map of the Roman Empire** at the time of Jesus' birth. All the red was considered the Roman Empire. It was vast and covered an immense amount of territory from Spain to Syria. The pink areas were client states: like satellites under Roman control. You can see

that Judea, or Palestine as the Greeks and Romans called it, was one of those. So that explains why Q comes up. As the Roman governor of Syria, he would have ultimate oversight of the client state of Judea.

One of the things that we know Caesar Augustus and other emperors did was require people to register with the government through a census. This was ultimately for tax purposes. Now to us, this is just a historical detail that seems unimportant. But not to the Jews of the time as one writer pointed out, **(LCD) “Luke’s original audience—people who lived in the Roman Empire in the first century—would understand the census as a visible sign of Rome’s power over the provinces. The census in Judea would raise taxes to benefit Rome and impoverish the Jews.”** A Jew reading Luke’s gospel in the first century would probably read about the census and say, “Pfft! Lousy Romans!” Like you might read the news about Putin’s latest move. Don’t miss the emotion this would have generated. The Jews are an oppressed people looking for a deliverer!

Then there’s the mention of **(LCD) Augustus Caesar**. Who was he? He was the Lord Palpatine of his time! Just like Lord Palpatine connived his way to becoming the ruthless, dictatorial Emperor in the Star Wars saga, so did Augustus, through murder and intrigue, move Rome from a republic to an empire. Once made Emperor, he used his overwhelming force to institute the Pax Romana – world peace, which lasted over 150 years. As a result, he came to be venerated as the “son of God” who brought “euangelion,” “good news” of glad tidings! Submit to Augustus and you’ll have peace! This was great for everyone willing to worship him...but not the Jews. Again, the mention of Augustus Caesar reminds Luke’s readers that they’re an oppressed people desperately needing God to bring them true “good news of great joy.”

Now the commentaries spend a ton of time talking about a historical inconsistency with Luke’s account here. To make it short, **(LCD) Luke is telling us that Jesus was born when Q conducted his census**. That occurred, according to Roman history, in 6 A.D. However, in chapter 1 and in Matthew’s gospel, we know that Jesus was born when Herod the Great was alive. He died in 4 B.C. which means that Jesus had to have been born before that; meaning, at least 12 years before Q’s census. See the problem? Additionally, we know from **(LCD) Acts 5:37**, that Luke is aware of a Jewish revolt during Q’s census in 6 A.D. In other words, Luke was well aware that Q’s census was well after the birth of Jesus. So how do we explain this? Well, there isn’t any consensus, but one idea is found in my NIV Bible. I have a footnote which reads, “*Or This census took place before,*” as opposed to “first.” The Greek word there can mean “before” though it almost always means “first” as the translators chose. There isn’t a definitive answer to this seeming inconsistency, but we know that the rest of Luke’s gospel is incredibly accurate to known history and, as we’d do with other credible historians, I think we can give him the benefit of the doubt until archaeology helps us figure it out! Regardless, the point of these first two verses is to set the world stage that Jesus is born into: one of world domination and oppression crying out for deliverance.

Back to our detective hats, verse 3, “*And everyone went to their own town to register. 4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the*”

town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.” Again, I can’t hit on everything here, but suffice to say that the census caused a poor Nazarene family to have to make a very long journey, most likely on foot, to Bethlehem. Again, let’s look at **(LCD) a map**. To get from Nazareth to Bethlehem, you could go two ways: around via the Jordan River to avoid the Samaritan people who Jews viewed as enemies. That trip was about 90 miles and took four days. Or you could go through Samaria. That trip was about 70 miles and took three days. Knowing that Mary was pregnant, it makes sense that they took the shorter route. Yet, regardless of the route, this land is mountainous and filled with dangers from animals and bandits. Plus, only the rich had donkeys so contrary to legend, they probably walked the entire way...which makes me doubt that she was near delivery. More on that later.

Just a quick aside. We visited both **(LCD) Nazareth** and Bethlehem during our Israel Trip. While in Nazareth, we visited the **(LCD) Church of the Annunciation** which tradition says was the site of Mary’s home and where Gabriel visited her with news that she’d bear the savior of the world. The **(LCD) front of the church** has John 1:14 written in Latin, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The incarnation – God becoming human. Wow! Once you **(LCD) go inside**, there is a Catholic church and supposedly, right here, is where Mary’s home was. Very interesting.

From this place, Joseph and Mary made their way to the tiny hamlet of **(LCD) Bethlehem** which we also visited. This is the Church of the Nativity which again tradition says was built over the site of where Jesus was born. It’s so interesting because you **(LCD) go through this tiny door** and then, once inside, it’s this opulent shrine. Now there were too many people there for us to get in line to see it, but the highlight in this church is the alter which is said to be built over **(LCD) the cave** that Jesus was born in. Actually, this tradition goes back to the second century so many scholars believe it to be true. Powerful!

Anyways, Joseph and Mary go there while they were “*pledged to be married.*” Actually, we know from Matthew that they already were married, so what’s up with this? Plus, would an unmarried couple in that time travel and live together? Darrell Bock suggests, **(LCD) “The reference to Mary as betrothed may have a motive. It does not suggest that Mary is not yet married to Joseph, since this trip in a betrothal situation would be unlikely. Rather, it means that the marriage is not yet consummated and thus implies a virgin birth.”** Why is that important? Because of the famous prophecy from Isaiah, **(LCD) “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel.”** Luke is making a connection to the great prophecy that the Messiah, Immanuel, which means, “God with us,” is born of a virgin – meaning He’s fully human and fully divine. Somehow God is accomplishing the miraculous in the midst of the ordinary. Don’t miss it!

Finally, we get the last list of facts, verse 6, “*While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.*”

Notice that Luke writes, *“While they were there.”* Remember I mentioned that I don’t think Mary was near delivery when they walked 70 miles through the mountains? *“While they were there,”* suggests that they arrived in Bethlehem and were there awhile before Mary gave birth. Now I don’t think they were there a long time, but I also don’t think they got there **(LCD) one dark night**, looked around and found “no vacancy” signs everywhere, turned away by everyone, and ended up in a stable that same night!

Now we get that impression because many English translations like **(LCD) the New American Standard say that “there was no room for them in the inn.”** My translation says, “guest room.” That is what the word here, “katalyma,” means. It is used this way in the Last Supper passage. The word for “inn” is a different word used in the Good Samaritan story. Mark Strauss describes it, **(LCD) “This could have been (1) a lower-level room or stall for animals attached to the living quarters of a private residence, (2) a cave used as a shelter for animals (as some ancient traditions have claimed), or even (3) a feeding place under the open sky, perhaps in the town square.”** I’d like to suggest that, in light of the importance of hospitality in ancient Israel, it’s either number one, or, according to the ancient tradition, a cave that was made part of a family home.

Take a look at a **(LCD) typical first century, Israelite home.** You’ll see that the living quarters were upstairs, and animals, so valuable, were kept downstairs next to, as Strauss suggested, the “katalyma,” the guest room. My opinion is that this is what was taken up...the guest rooms, probably because of the census. So where did Joseph and Mary go? I like what one person surmised, **(LCD) “Jesus was not born in a stable but in the main quarters of a house (which may have included a cave into its living space)...As a good middle-eastern host, the head of the house could not turn the couple away, nor would he ask his guests to find alternate lodging...Since the family livestock was kept in the room adjacent to where Jesus was born, Jesus would have been place in one of the mangers...”** This makes much more sense to me. By the way, we got to **(LCD) see a typical first century home** and it’s just like the picture shows.

Now why make a big deal of all this? Now it’s time to put on John’s robes and take a more personal, spiritual approach to Dr. Luke’s facts. I said at the beginning that the common story is that Bethlehem did not make room for Jesus. As we saw, I think that they did make room for Him. At least here during His infancy. But the question I have for us this morning is what about us, what about our hearts? Is there a **(LCD) no vacancy sign on it? Have you made room for Jesus in your heart?** What do I mean by that? Well, I’d like to have us consider this question by looking at three stark contrasts that I see in this description of Jesus’ birth.

(LCD) Contrast #1: Caesar Augustus, Roman Emperor vs. Jesus Christ, Poor Infant – make room for Jesus’ kingship in your life. What a contrast in rulers! I told you about Caesar, but Jesus too was born to be a king according to the great prophecy from Micah, **(LCD) “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”** The Ancient of Days. God in the flesh. Phew! Who is king in your life? What kingdom values drives your life: the ones of this

world or the ones of Christ? Who are you enthralled by: Jesus or celebrities? Recently **(LCD) Prince William and Princess Catherine** visited Boston and they attended a Celtics basketball game. Afterwards, the press asked the coach of the Celtics, Joe Mazzulla, if he got to meet with the royal family. **(LCD) Mazzulla said, “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph? I’m only familiar with one royal family.”** Mazzulla is deeply committed to Jesus Christ and isn’t afraid to say so. Who are you impressed by? What kingdom are you living in? Make room for King Jesus by submitting to Him in everything.

Second contrast, **(LCD) Human Decrees vs. God’s Decrees – make room for seeing the hand of God in your daily circumstances.** Now the Roman census was a bummer to every Jew! What?! Seriously?! What an inconvenience! What an injustice! But God was in it! Joseph and Mary needed to get to Bethlehem in order to fulfill prophecy and God used Caesar to do it! Caesar didn’t even know that his royal decree actually was used by God to further His eternal purposes. Make room for seeing the hand of God in your daily circumstances. That slow car in front of you? Maybe it’s God keeping you from getting into an accident! That inconvenient decision by your company or the government? Banish complaining and make room for seeing that in the midst of all the human decisions and events, God is at work. Rejoice in Him, not your circumstances!

Third contrast, **(LCD) The World Stage vs. The Private Home – make room for “Jesus” in your home/life.** While all the front page news is focused on Caesar and the Rome, God is focused on an ordinary home in tiny Bethlehem; specifically in one smelly room and one, stone carved feeding trough where a swaddled baby was laid. Phew! We need to make room for Jesus in the ordinary places – our homes and everyday lives. What comes to mind is Jesus’ great parable of the sheep and the goats, **(LCD) “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”** Are we making room for “Jesus” in our lives or are we too busy chasing Caesar? Is there anyone God is placing on your heart to make room for in your life? A homeless person, a co-worker, a neighbor? People need to know the love of God? Will you make room?

Our theme for this Christmas season is **(LCD) Come Home.** We chose this theme with several types of people in mind: To those who have not yet returned to in-person worship, we say, “Come home.” To those who are far from God for various reasons, we say, “Come home.” To those who used to be close to God but have drifted for some reason, we say, “Come home.” We say that because Jesus said this, **(LCD) “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.”** He’s made room for you. He left His perfect home to join us in our mess in order to make room for us with Him. Will you make room for Him?