

The Day that Set the Calendars of the World • Luke 2:1-20

“A.D.” is an abbreviation for the Latin words Anno Domini meaning “the year of our Lord.” While it is certainly true that not everyone acknowledges Jesus Christ as Lord, still most of the world dates its calendars by the birth of Jesus Christ. All our letters, every check, every birth certificate, every newspaper, every postmark, every copyright at the end of a movie or sports telecast is dated by the birth of Jesus Christ.

Two thousand years ago there probably wasn't a person in the world who could have imagined that Jesus' birthday would set the calendars of the world. After all, Jesus was only one of many in the Christmas story, some of whom may have seemed far more important at the time. For example, the Christmas story in Luke 2 begins with the famous Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus: “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.”

The Romans took a census every fourteen years. The purpose was for taxation and compulsory military service. In many ways their census was not unlike the census we take in America every ten years. It is especially interesting that the United States had a census in the year 2000 which marked the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus—also a census year.

The census was ordered by Caesar Augustus, considered to be the first Roman emperor. His original name was Caius Octavius. He was born in 63 B.C. and died in A.D. 14. He was a grand-nephew of Julius Caesar who named him as his successor, although Caesar Augustus never knew of it until Julius Caesar had died.

Historically he was a very important figure. He was a powerful military leader who united the empire, established the Pax Romana, built roads and cities and was a patron of the arts. One ancient saying claimed that when he came into power Rome was a city made of brick and when he left Rome was a city made of marble.

In 27 B.C. the Roman Senate gave him the

title “Augustus” meaning “consecrated” or “holy”. In essence, they declared him to be a god. At his funeral Roman citizens comforted themselves with the belief that has a god he was immortal and lived forever.

With his new name and title of Caesar Augustus, the Roman Senate further honored him by renaming the month formerly known as Sextilis “August”. We have retained his honor for over 2000 years so that every summer we have the 31-day month of August named after him. It is an interesting footnote of history that every time we write an August date we honor the month of Caesar Augustus and the years of Jesus Christ. Ironically, the two men never met.

It was the decree of Caesar Augustus that set in motion the circumstances for the birth of Jesus. If it were not for his census, there would be no birth in Bethlehem, no manger, no nearby shepherds or so many of the things we associate with the Christmas story.

It impresses me that God accomplishes his great purposes through people who don't even know it. Today the names and titles are different. The famous and powerful people are the president of the United States, heads of Middle Eastern countries or CEOs of huge companies. They many not know

a thing about Jesus but God still uses their decisions to accomplish his great purposes in history. I assume that Caesar Augustus died without ever knowing that Jesus was born in his empire during his reign.

In the much smaller and more parochial setting of Bethlehem the couple of the year was Joseph and Mary. They were strangers in that village—a man and his 9-month pregnant wife who had walked the 80 miles from their home in Nazareth at the worst possible time in order to register for the census.

I tried to imagine what that would be like today, so I called Northwest Airlines to see if I could make a reservation for a nine-month-preg-

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nant Mary. I was immediately put on hold while the person I was speaking to checked with a supervisor. After waiting for several minutes she came back and read to me the Northwest policy. It states that if a woman is within 30 days of delivery she must have a written statement signed by her doctor dated within 72 hours of departure indicating her due date and that she probably won't give birth on the flight. Women in labor are denied boarding for safety reasons. So you see, not much has changed in 2000 years. Mary would still have to use ground transportation today!

When they arrived Bethlehem was packed with tourists. There was no vacancy at the local inn. Seeing their circumstances, the innkeeper graciously allowed them to stay in the courtyard where the animals were bedded and fed.

Her baby was coming soon and the story seems to hint that Joseph first registered for the census. That way there were two for taxes and not three. Just the opposite of today where a dependent saves on income taxes, in those days they paid a head tax so it was cheaper to pay for two than to pay for three.

Because Mary's time of delivery was so close it was too risky to start back to Nazareth. That would take several days at a donkey's pace. The only alternative was to stay in Bethlehem and wait for the contractions to begin.

But the courtyard would have been a very public place with people coming and going constantly. When the contractions began with her accompanying cries, Mary must have drawn a great deal of attention to herself. In all probability guests at the inn came out to see what was going on. Mary didn't have the privacy any woman would want to deliver her baby. And Joseph had a difficult decision to make. Should he stand by Mary when she needed him or should he chase away the gawkers? It was anything but the best of circumstances.

When the baby was born they immediately wrapped him in traditional swaddling cloths. It was the practice of the time to take a square piece of cloth with a long strip coming from one of the corners. It must have looked a little like a kite with a cloth tail. The square was used like a diaper and the piece of attached cloth was used to wrap him up like a mummy. When all wrapped

up he was put down in the feeding trough - - - probably because the ground was dirty and there was nowhere else to put him.

And what do you think everyone was talking about? Surely this public birth was the talk of the village. In an otherwise quiet and uneventful place there were out-of-town tourists with multiple stories and this was probably the best story of the entire year. Joseph and Mary became the couple of the year. Probably the gossip ranged from laughter to pity.

"And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night." Their names are not recorded. That is no surprise since shepherds weren't very important people. They were looked down on by much of society, especially by the very religious. The religion of the day was very legalistic including lots of rituals about cleanliness. However, shepherds lived outside with their sheep and couldn't keep the rituals. They were outcasts who never measured up. Like most societies, prejudice ran rampant. Shepherds became despised, were the objects of disdain and probably of ugly degrading humor. They were not allowed to be witnesses in court because they were assumed to be untrustworthy.

What next happened was supernatural, spectacular and, in a way, a great joke. An angel of the Lord appeared to shepherds! Not to Caesar Augustus in Rome, not to Quirinius the governor, not to the super religious orthodox guys with squeaky-clean hands and clothes. The angel came to lowly shepherds nobody had ever heard of. God must have laughed at the irony and fun of his choice.

There may be a subtle secret in the selection of the shepherds. You see, they probably were not ordinary shepherds. In order to keep a continuous supply of unblemished and healthy sheep for temple sacrifice, special temple flocks were maintained outside Bethlehem. The shepherds were still shepherds but these sheep were born for sacrifice in Jerusalem. It is a subtle symbol that the child in Bethlehem was also born to be a sacrifice in Jerusalem.

And then there were the angels. Angels are messengers. In fact, the Greek word for messenger is "angel". The number one job of an angel is to communicate God's message. I don't know

if angels get nervous if they have important messages to speak, but if so, this angel must have been frightened. At least he terrified the shepherds, for on what seemed to be a rather dull and ordinary night this angel appeared to them and spoke words from God saying:

“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:10-12)

Then the angel was joined by thousands of fellow angels who praised God with words in unison. They didn’t sing, they said, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

Isn’t that interesting? The peace isn’t for everyone. It’s just for those who believe in Jesus and receive the favor of God. They are those who love and praise God.

Whoosh! The angels disappeared as quickly as they came. It seems that angels in the Bible never hang around for very long. They are in and out; their visits are counted in seconds more than minutes or hours. They don’t want to distract from God—they are always pointing to him. Angels always bring attention to the Lord whom they represent. It is God who is important, not the angels. They were merely the messengers of the moment in the Christmas story. The real center of attention is the child of eternity. He is the One who would forever reset the calendars of history.

And so with the angels gone and the shepherds still blinking their eyes, they rushed off to nearby Bethlehem in order to see the Baby. And there he was, just as the angel had said. Not in a house or a crib, but lying in a manger . . . all wrapped up like a mummy, with Joseph and Mary nearby looking at him.

Faithless eyes would have seen nothing but an ordinary newborn baby, but the shepherds saw nothing ordinary. They saw all that had been predicted in God’s message to them. They were dazzled and amazed. They told everyone who

would listen—and people actually listened to ordinary shepherds and believed this stunning story they told! They glorified and praised God and couldn’t stop talking about what had happened and whom they had seen.

Why this child’s birth should become the center point of history’s calendar is explained in three words spoken by the angel: “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”

“Savior” explains the whole purpose of Jesus’ birth. He came to save us from sin. If we miss that, we miss Jesus. He’s not most about mangers or angels or holidays or politics or happiness. He’s most about salvation. The whole premise of Jesus’ coming is that every human being is a sinner, lost from God and heaven. Jesus came to die, pay the penalty for sin and bring us back to God. That is why it is so important for every person to accept Jesus as Savior. To merely acknowledge him as a great man of history is not enough. He must be acknowledged and accepted as Savior or we will die forever in our sins.

“Christ” is a title meaning “Messiah”. It means that he was anointed or chosen to represent God on earth and accomplish God’s great purposes in history. He is God’s Man. He is the

One God promised would come. He is extra special. He is one-of-a-kind. He is the Christ!

“Lord” is the word ancient Jews used to refer to God. This is a most amazing word to be connected to Jesus. He is “the Lord Jesus”.

That means that Jesus is God. Not just *from* God but God himself—100% God! When we pray to Jesus we are praying to God. When we follow Jesus we are following God. When we love Jesus we are loving God. God came to earth and became human like us in order to save us from sin so that we can be with him in heaven forever. That is the biggest news of all of history. It is the most amazing and wonderful thing that has ever happened. The child born in Bethlehem is the center point of history! All dates before and af-

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ter his birth are calculated around him. He is the Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior.

El Nino is a climatic change in the waters of the Pacific Ocean that raises the surface temperature a few degrees and can impact the entire globe. In some places (like Minnesota!) it brings warm weather during winter. In other places it brings flooding or drought. The effects are different in different places.

El Nino is Spanish for “the Child” and refers to Jesus because the warm waters of El Nino always come around Christmas time. It is a fitting title because the coming of Jesus always has had and always will have far-reaching effects. For some his coming is wonderfully good and pleasant and for some it is dangerous and devastating. Depending on how we respond to the Christ Child he may bring us peace, salvation and eternal life — or judgment and eternity without God. But, let us remember, the most important El Nino is not the climate but the Christ.

This Christmas may we welcome his warm coming and all the changes he can and will bring to our lives. May his coming not only set the

calendars of the world, but may they be the starting point of our eternal lives.

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. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting El Nino. While they were there, the time came for El Nino to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

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