

**History of a Promise – Luke 2:1-7**  
Christmas Eve Message by Pastor Joe Davis  
Union Baptist Church – 12/24/2016

**I. INTRODUCTION**

We're here tonight to remember and celebrate the night of our Savior's birth...the night when God's only Son, the eternally existing Jesus Christ, was born as a human baby. Having been conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb some 9 months earlier, the Son of God, the Christ, the Messiah, was about to appear in fulfillment of countless prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures and two more recent prophecies that had been made to Mary and Joseph themselves through angels. The One who would crush the head of that ancient serpent, the devil, as promised to Adam and Eve after their fall in the garden, was about to arrive in the painful and bloody and agonizing way that all human babies arrive. The One who was to be called, Jesus, because he would save people from their sins, was alive in the womb of Mary and ready to face the difficult path that lay ahead...a path that all too soon would lead him to death on a cross at the hands of those he came to save.

We've all heard the Christmas story, many times in fact. This is at least my 44<sup>th</sup> time hearing it at Christmas. A few of you out there could even be approaching your 70<sup>th</sup>, 80<sup>th</sup> or dare I say 90<sup>th</sup> time? But we're still here, celebrating and remembering that amazing night when God came to dwell with us. It's a great story, isn't it? Even many of those who don't know Jesus, who haven't trusted him as their Savior, still appreciate the story and find it interesting and can bring themselves once a year to listen to it again.

But is it just a good story? Is it just like "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" or "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" or "The Polar Express," or "It's A Wonderful Life?" ...Just a really good tale that's fun to listen to once in a while? Perhaps just a pleasant reminder of the childlike belief and imagination we once had, but have long since put behind us for more realistic ideas? What does the Christmas story of God becoming flesh and bone to save people from their sins mean to you? Have you heard and accepted and immersed yourself in its message and truth, or is it still in the Santa Claus category?

I'd like you to turn with me in your Bibles to Luke chapter 2, a passage you've probably heard every Christmas Eve of your entire life. But we're going to spend a few minutes this evening looking at it again, though I hope in a way that allows you to see it anew and recognize it as so much more than just a good story. Tonight we're going to look at verses 1 through 7 of Luke chapter 2, and then tomorrow, for those of you that plan to join us between 11:00 am and noon, we'll continue on through verses 8 to 20.

## II. A CENSUS DECREED BY CAESAR (Luke 2:1-3)

Let's begin by reading verses 1 to 3:

***1 Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. 2 This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city.***

So here we are at a specific time in history, with two known historical figures mentioned by name, and the historical record of a decree being sent out from the Roman emperor himself to take a census of the entire Roman world. Kind of strange details to include if you're just telling a good story, don't you think? These are all details that could be independently verified by any of Luke's readers, some of whom may have even been alive and remembered participating in this very census. Luke is believed to have written his book between A.D. 62 and 65. I kind of get the idea that Luke is about to tell us something that's a true historical event, don't you? In fact, the very introduction to Luke's gospel tells us that he's writing this book as a sort of historical record. He's writing it to tell us the exact truth about things that actually happened and were reported by eyewitnesses. Luke had carefully investigated these things and was writing them down for us in chronological order.

Now Caesar Augustus, as you may remember from history class, was the first emperor of Rome and reigned from 27 B.C. to A.D. 14. He decreed this census to serve as the basis for taxation in the Roman empire. People were to register their names, their property and their income so they could be taxed appropriately. Quirinius, the governor of Syria, was mentioned because Palestine, where Bethlehem and Jerusalem were located, was a province of Syria at this time in

history. So in response to this decree from Caesar, people were on the move, each traveling to their own city to be registered.

### **III. JOSEPH AND MARY OBEY THE DECREE AND TRAVEL TO BETHLEHEM (Luke 2:4-5)**

Among the people traveling to register for the census were Joseph and Mary. Let's pick up in verse 4:

***4 Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, 5 in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child.***

Joseph and a pregnant Mary were traveling to Bethlehem, the city of David, since Joseph was of the house and family of David. If you'll remember back to the Old Testament, David's father was called Jesse the Bethlehemite, and David was born and raised in the little town of Bethlehem. God had determined that this small town, just 6 miles south of Jerusalem, was going to be very significant throughout the ages.

And isn't it interesting to see how God uses even secular authorities to accomplish his purposes? The decree of Caesar Augustus didn't just happen to take place at this particular time in history. Instead, God ordained that it would happen in this specific timing so that Joseph and Mary would have to be in Bethlehem when the baby was born. This reminds us that God is intimately involved in the everyday of our lives and accomplishing his will in things that may seem very ordinary to us.

God brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem through the census at just the right time in order to fulfill that prophecy about the Messiah from Micah 5:2:

***"But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
Too little to be among the clans of Judah,  
From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.  
His goings forth are from long ago,  
From the days of eternity."***

The Messiah, one described as eternal, would go forth to be ruler in Israel out of a tiny town called Bethlehem, and Joseph and Mary were walking into the fulfillment of this ancient prophecy. God was about to make history of a promise. And I'm guessing Joseph and Mary didn't even realize why they needed to be in Bethlehem.

#### IV. MARY GIVES BIRTH TO HER FIRSTBORN SON (Luke 2:6-7)

So you're probably imagining now that Mary is 9 months pregnant making the 70 mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem on the back of a donkey. Well, let's read our last two verses for tonight and see if that's the case:

***6 While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.***

Wait a minute? Where's the donkey? And where does it say that the night of their arrival she went into labor? Now, of course, it's quite likely that she did ride some type of animal on the 70 mile journey, but were you surprised to see that a donkey wasn't mentioned? We have that picture so firmly fixed in our minds that we assume it must have come out of Scripture. We're also only told that sometime while Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem the days were completed for her to give birth. So it's quite possible that they had traveled to Bethlehem somewhat earlier in her pregnancy and remained there until she gave birth. I guess the warning here is to be careful and listen to what the words of Scripture actually say and separate that from popular ideas of what might have happened.

I want you to notice also that phrase in verse 6: ***"the days were completed for her to give birth."*** The meaning of the original Greek is: "the time was fulfilled." We get the idea that God had a specific day picked out for Jesus to be born and it happened right on schedule! Mary gave birth to her firstborn son, who is really the Son of God himself, at exactly the time planned from before the foundation of the world. And the birthplace of the Son of God was a stable for animals.

Very early historical tradition, at least dating from the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., says that Mary and Joseph were actually in a cave set-up for animals that was in the side of a hill behind the inn. But whatever Jesus' birthplace looked

like, we know for sure that it was a shelter for animals and that baby Jesus was wrapped tightly in cloths and nestled up in a feeding trough. Even this humble bed became a sign, as we'll see tomorrow, that God would use to start spreading the word that Messiah had come.

The Son of God promised for long ages had finally arrived right on schedule and he did it in the most unusual and unexpected way, right in the middle of the ordinary events of human existence...right in the middle, in fact, of some very difficult circumstances that Mary and Joseph were enduring. Our God is in the details and even the ordinary becomes extraordinary in his hands. He is also surprising and his ways are so often completely opposite to what we would expect.

## **V. APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION**

So as we close tonight and I send you home to whatever traditions you have planned this evening and tomorrow, I just want to challenge you to not miss the extraordinary in the ordinary of your daily lives. As we've seen tonight, God works in the details of our everyday lives and he works in in real life. He's still just as alive and active as he was back when Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem. Yes, he was doing some extra special and amazing things to herald the birth of our Savior, but he is still intimately involved in the details or your life and my life and his miracles are all around us if we have eyes to see them.

As you celebrate Christmas this year, remember that the Christmas story is so much more than just a good story. It's a true historical event that happened in fulfillment of a promise in normal, everyday life. It brought good news of great joy that is still for you and me and all people, and is just as true and powerful today as it was when it happened on that special night so long ago and made history of a promise. The One who still provides salvation, forgiveness, new life and so much more, to all who will trust in him, is still calling out to every person on the planet and offering peace with God, joy in every circumstance, and a love like we've never known before. Let's answer the call and walk closely with him in the everyday of our lives and into eternity. Let's be aware of his presence and look for his activity as we celebrate and remember his birth tonight and tomorrow. The Savior has been born and he is Jesus Christ our Lord!