

Luke 2:1-7

“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus to register the entire empire...”

I find it intriguing how God decreed such a cosmically preeminent occasion as the incarnation of the Son of God, having just celebrated the glad prophecy of Zechariah and the grateful *Magnificat* of Mary, by placing it in the context of “those days” of another decree. The decree of the Roman Emperor, the most powerful human law of the time. Even now Caesar Augustus, or Octavius, is still considered one of the most powerful men of history, having taken Julius Caesar’s empire to an even greater place of world dominance and influence by stabilizing The Roman Empire for almost 20 years of peace after decades of war.

So, when Octavius ordered a registration for every person in the empire, Mary and Joseph obeyed. I like to wonder, however, what they thought of such a law. A tax law, if you will, to fund a pagan Empire which had been hostile to the Jewish nation. Caesar was going to be assessing his coffers and making sure that his favored city, Rome, was secured by the power of the gladius, the centurion, and the bribe; the sword, the soldier, and the statesmen. How do you feel when your taxes go to fund unrighteous purposes and are bound up in the corrupt schemes of powerful men? Some things never change.

And this decree was not merely a political annoyance, but because of their Jewish custom, they were also required to return to the town of their ancestry, making this decree a particularly burdensome life disruption. They had to now travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a distance of roughly 80 miles, on their feet, two of which were pregnant feet.

How would you handle such a decree? Such a disruption? Such governmental interference into your life and expectations and comforts? I know when I sit in my recliner and fill out the paperwork for my tax return every year, sipping my favorite drink and nibbling on some chocolate...I whine about how oppressive and unjust the government may be. The great irony and deception of my sin reveals itself again

when I sit at my morning reading of the Exodus and wonder how the Israelites could grumble against God when they had seen such a miraculous salvation and then I get in a bad mood when I find a little mold on the 12-grain that somebody else baked and bought and placed in the bread basket. “Why didn’t I just die in Egypt?!” Blind faithlessness. That’s what it is. Blind doubt and a dimmed view of history and a dim-witted view of God’s grace. A thankless heart which has forgotten its former slavery and the greatness of the salvation which someone else secured for it.

Thankfully, God is not impeded by dim-wits, be they in government or just grumbling cheapskates who don’t want to pony up and hire a CPA like they should.

The amazing wisdom of God is revealed in this governmental annoyance. Though the most powerful government in the world, led by an impertinent and arrogant narcissist, compelled the loathsome discomfort of a woman stretched with child, we find that such a law was actually God’s very means of fulfilling His greatest promise. For, it was through this decree of Octavius, and unknown to the buyers in the markets, to the man plowing the fields, to the woman getting her children up in the morning after a long night of repairing the frayed edges of clothes fully played out, that the divine Curse-Breaker was coming to Bethlehem just as He had promised.

You see, the sage eloquently notes that it is always God who meticulously directs history, and no other. Though men make choices according to their desires and based upon the short-sighted wisdom of their dirt-born minds, it is God who directs their paths. He says, “the king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He chooses.” (Pro. 21:1) No decree of governing powers is ever outside the sovereign power of God. It is simply God’s means to a greater end. No dictator or tyrant, no elected or appointed official, no usurper or rebel can ever direct a path for history that is not ultimately turned or directed and sewn into the fabric of History by the omnipotent and omniscient and good hands of the Almighty.

Therefore, this brief note in the Christmas story informs us that we need fear no decree, imposition, or law, whether it be just or unjust, for our God is tying together all the strands of history, even if iron-chained or blood-stained, in order to accomplish His great and glorious good. This decree of the wicked Octavian was at

the very root of God's foreknowing wisdom as the means of transporting Mary and Joseph, through their suffering no less, to fulfill His greater and more glorious good. What about all the other families, put out by the decree, travelling to their hometowns around the empire? They went for the same purpose, though they did not perceive it, caught up in the river of God's redemptive flow, coursing down into the ocean of God's greatest mercy: the advent of the Serpent-Crusher, the Curse-Destroyer, the Death-Defeater, the Hero of Mankind. Had they all known this great truth, would they have rejoiced at the decree? Would they have travelled through their Winter troubles with a Spring-ier step?

The manner of the incarnation tells us, then, that no matter how foolish, or even evil, the governmental powers of this world may be, we know that God is working out His will through them, and that no matter what we may see, we can rejoice in the outcome that they are sure to produce: the glory of God, the redemption of His people, the defeat of Evil, and the restoration of Creation, all through the Christ. Will this knowledge lighten your steps, too? Will it change the way in which we respond to the supposed history-makers in the light of the great History Writer? Consider that no-vacancy sign, that final annoyance at the end of the long road of discomfort after discomfort, having hoped that you finally reached a place of rest, only to find "You Can't Stay Here." What no-vacancy sign do you now see? What refusal of rest, that if you knew its purpose in the wisdom of God would make your sufferings, both small and great, full of meaning and significance and glory which far outshine this present darkness? There is no such restlessness which does not have a promise of God suitable to it and superior to swallow it up for joy.

It is in the midst of "those days" of annoyance and aggravation that the Maker of all which has been made, adverts to the Made. To a girl and her fiancé, travelling amidst the throngs of other itinerants pressing in on the road, heavy with traffic and her heavy with child.

And of course, her shame is multiplied by this no-vacancy sign, for this unwed couple whom, in the eyes of Bethlehem's self-assured, was surely unrighteous. So, they were forced to take refuge in a stall. That's what the word "manger" means. In

fact, the use of the word most often refers to the pen, not the feed trough. Tradition informs us, and archeology shows us, that Bethlehem has numerous caves surrounding it where shepherds and ranchers would stall their animals for safety from the elements and predators. The shepherds would put feed on a raised stone shelf. It was most likely this stone upon which the Rock of Ages was shelved.

In fact, the Scripture tells us of another woman in God's story of redemption who gave birth near Bethlehem. Rachel, Israel's beloved wife, fatally gave birth to her final son just short of Bethlehem. As her life fled from her, she named her son Benoni, which means either "son of my sorrow" or "son of my doom." But his father named him Benjamin, which means "son of my right hand."

In like manner, the Savior of the world will leave his stall on a two-fold tale of terrible joy. His first path is that of the man of sorrows acquainted with grief, the suffering servant of the Most High, the humiliated horror which was rejected by men, walking the path of doom as the one who would bear the weight of the world's mutiny, hatred, and violence before the burning presence of the thrice-holy God and pay it down. In His birth, the Infinite made Himself Infant, the Vigorous made Himself Vulnerable. While political powers deceive and hide, the Almighty God stooped in honestly, openly, and exposed. And in His death God doomed Himself so that He would be both just and merciful to grant us salvation and reconciliation with Himself. He was born a son of sorrow, the Son of God's doom.

Yet, the second path is that of God's most glorious Son, the Delight of His Father's eyes, the obedient one who would receive all the inheritance promised, the triumphant Champion who gains the Triumph from Heaven, who secures the redemption of the elect given to Him by the Father as His reward, and who would sit down...at the right hand of God having fully completed His work. He is the son of God's right hand, who laid down His life and took it up again.

So he receives the twin titles of the only Divine King: Lord of Glory and Suffering Servant. And this was the two-fold path which God Himself ordained for His birth of absolute dependence. The shame of this unmarried couple was the means of God's self-ordination of glorious humility. His Bethlehem birth in an animal stall,

eternity bound up by strips of cloth, revealed His regal glory and His human humility. The insignificant son of an unwed mother and an artisan father, to a poor family from a backwards town, nothing in the eyes of men.

God ordained such an entry for the Son. While our birth is our fate, His birth was His deed. And He chose humility. He worked humility. He owned humility as His choice on the path to glory. Lowliness is forced upon us, but it was His trade, His craft, His artistry elect from before the foundations of the world and brushed upon that stall. He strove for humility and beckoned it near because He knew that's where he would find us. In the dung heap, with the animals, huddled in the darkness. Christmas is for those on the dunghill.

And that is where we find Him in His death, too. Our death is our fate, but His was His deed. It was He, who in the words of the apostle, "humbled Himself to the point of death, even death on a cross." This King of glory, whom Zechariah pronounced was the "horn of salvation" redefined in such an entrance what it means to be truly human: to serve one another. God could have ordained a wealthy family, an established family, an honorable family, a powerful family. He could have ordained a room in the house, an open bed, a welcoming family where there was a place for him. But he didn't. He came to where "there was no place" for him. Christmas is for those with 'no place.'

Why did God do it this way?

So that you and I would know that our Master *knows* our suffering. Maybe you feel like there's no place for you. That you're unwanted, an outcast, a throw-away. So is His Son. He has cried your tears. He has winced at the sideways glances of the haughty, the shaming wags of the heads of those who knew him as a bastard, fatherless nothing whom they did not esteem at all. You see, it was for your sake that God chose humility. It was for your sake that the Almighty, with no need pressing upon Him, chose to salvage and save and sanctify you. To come to you in the dung heap and drag you up into His triumph.

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.” (2 Cor. 8:9)

It was for your sake that God ordained Joseph and Mary to leave their comforts. It was for your sake that God ordained no place for His Son in the inn.

It was for your sake that God ordained an animal stall for His Anointed Son.

It was for your sake that God ordained no family around to rejoice.

It was for your sake that God ordained the humble beginnings of David’s heir and Savior-King.

Now, this precious grace of God, this kindness, this undeserved compassion should shame our love of sin. It should deeply and irreducibly humble us. You see, He is pure. We are not. Our dung heap is our own making. We chose it, not for love, but for spite. We would rather have our self-will and self-deceived “freedom” on a pile of manure than submission in the household of God. We only wanted our Maker on our own self-centered terms. We, the creatures made from dirt, whom a single blade of grass can destroy, who succumbs to a miniscule germ, make demands of the Uncreated One on how he should be! How petulant! We sought to destroy His beauty, and we did destroy the beauty of His creation! We stole it and we ruined it. Even worse, we took His own Son, and we killed Him! WE KILLED THE SON OF GOD! People ask why God is angry at sinners: the same deluded self-dependent arrogance and carelessness which took the fruit off the tree is the same deluded self-dependent arrogance and carelessness which crucified the Son of God! We killed His Son. Would you not be angry? It wasn’t just a piece of fruit. It was hatred in a thin façade of leaves. And if you, being wicked, can tell that such violence is heinous, how much more so the Father of all life in whom there is no shadow or variation or evil at all?

And we think that we don’t need a mediator with God, that God should just let us into His presence and be happy about it. My friends, in the words of Thomas Goodwin, you have a better chance of standing in the presence of a thousand

burning suns and not being burnt up than you do standing in the presence of God without a mediator who can shield you.

So when we see the great glory of the Uncreated God in the face of this humble peasant child, and we know that it was His choice to take our place in such a way to redeem us, we see the depths of His love. When we see the holiness of this God in the face of this humble peasant child, it reveals to us how scandalously wicked our sin really is, the frivolity of our self-ascribed worth over such a holy God of kindness as this?! It brings us to our knees to know that we have taken advantage of such immense grace and kindness.

And when we see the promise of the Covenant-making God in the face of this humble peasant child, the promise of forgiveness, the expulsion of darkness and sorrow and guilt and shame and grief, of life for your death and glory for our transience, we rejoice in His arrival and proclaim with the angel hymnists: “Glory to God in the highest!”

So, how shall we respond to this kind of king? This King of Kings, whose power is supreme over all powers, who fashioned the Cosmos by sheer command, to whom Creation itself obeys when He speaks, yet who enters so humbly, to be cradled by feminine hands; so self-sacrificially, to be fully included into our shame and our guilt and our sorrow?

First, we trust Him. The kind of God who does this, can be trusted. He can be trusted when we cannot see beyond the ‘no vacancy’ sign. He can be trusted when we cannot see beyond our government’s foolish and unjust decrees. He can be trusted when we are called to walk the road of painful joints and swollen digits, of cancer-cells and tragic losses. Whate’er my God ordains is right, even when it costs me dearly. Emmet Johnson reminds us, “We when cannot understand God’s ways, we must throw ourselves upon God’s heart...upon the heart that so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son so that whomever would believe in Him would have eternal life.”

So, in Him we must put our trust. He is the sovereign King, the Lion who tears apart, the ferocious fire who consumes all things and in whose right arm is the power to form the galaxies. We do not come near to a mere lamb, but to a lion capable of tearing us limb from limb.

And for now, at this present time, we recall the moment when the Lion became a Lamb for you. When the tearing apart which we deserved, He endured. The fearsome fury of the infinitely holy God against the wicked (us) and evil ones (us again) who aggressively attacked Him and ruined His creation and destroyed the life which He created, was born by this Son of the Stall. We killed Him and God tore Him apart so that His killers would go free. And Jesus humbled Himself for this, so that He might bring many sons to glory through His suffering. He, and He alone, can take your ungrateful sin, and put it away by being torn apart for you.

In the words of Augustine, “Man’s Maker was made man that the Bread might be hungry, the Fountain thirst, the Light sleep, the Way be tired from the journey, the Truth might be accused by false witnesses, the Judge of the living and dead be judged by a mortal judge, Justice be sentenced by the unjust, the Teacher be beaten with whips, the Vine be crowned with thorns, the Foundation be suspended on wood, the Strength be made weak, the Healer be wounded, and that Life might die. Wake up, O human being! For it was for you that God was made man. Rise up and realize it was all for you. Eternal death would have awaited you had He not been born in time. Never would you be freed from your sinful flesh had He not taken to Himself the likeness of sinful flesh. Everlasting would be your misery had He not performed this act of mercy. You would not have come to life again had He not come to die your death. You would have perished had He not come.”

Therefore, O those who have fled to Jesus, let us walk as ransomed men. Freed men. Holy men. Let us live to boast of our humble King, our stooping sovereign. We are nothing but freed slaves, dead men reborn, wicked men forgiven, and by His blood made sons of God.

And let us walk like our Master, as humble men. Greatness, true greatness, is not found in wealth or palaces, in airpower or valor. It is found where the Great One

was found: in the low point. The shameful place is now a place of honor, the low point is the high point.

Can we lay aside our rights to comfort, to honor, to freedom, to power, to wealth? Can we leave them in Nazareth and instead lay down on the cold stone floor of the ashamed ones? Can we instead take up a cross, and die a thousand deaths to our own glory and reputation and rightness, for the sake of others? Can we, today, follow the humble beginnings of our great and glorious King?

Christmas is for the broken-hearted, the weary-laden, the humiliated and crushed in spirit. It is for the mother whose children have rejected her, but of the God who has not. It is for the parents whose teenager walks the shadows of death, but of the God who walks with him to light the path. It is for the brother whose sister is diagnosed with dementia, but of the God who sees and knows and enters in. It is for the lonely girl, desperate for someone to see her, who has no place, but of the God who comes all the way into the darkness of her cave to find her. It is for the young man, ashamed of his weakness and failure, but of the God who assumed the shame and dragged it down to hell for him and raised him up a new man with new life.

The Christmas story isn't mere mangers and shepherds, announcements of peace and travelers from the east with unpronounceable gifts. It is also a story of genocide and tyranny, the slaughter of innocents, the oppression of government, the normal sorrows, and of the reality of my hardened heart. It is the story of the God whose death is His deed, whose suffering is His choice, who ordained humility for Himself into the very heart of His violent rebel creation so that He might redeem it through His own doom. What kind of God is this? What child is this laid upon the shelf of an animal's stall?

The Christmas story is far more than the sentimental swag that our culture advances with feverish frivolity. It tiptoes into life with a realism which is unavoidable and when truly apprehended will break the strongest men upon the anvil of divine grace.

For Himself God ordained an understated birth, a life with no place, in the shadow of violence, shame, agony, terror, and death, so that you and I might give “Glory to God in the highest” and find peace with Him and make peace with one another. His joy was to bring your joy in delighting in God by the mercy of God for the sake of God. May His favor rest upon you this morning as you humbly submit to the King who loves you more than you can even imagine, rejoice in the Sovereign King who humbled Himself for the sake of defiant invaders, and returned to greatness so that the people of the Broken Heart might be swaddled in the newness of His life.