

Sunday, December 5, 2021

The First Christmas: The Politics

(Series: The First Christmas)

Luke 2:1-5; Matthew 2:1-7, 13-18

(Advent 2021)

Scripture:

*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.) ³And everyone went to his own town to register. ⁴So 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. ⁵He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. (Luke 2:1-5)*

*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of **King Herod**, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ²and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."*

³When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

*'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.'"*

⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

¹³When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." ¹⁴So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was

fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son." ¹⁶When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. ¹⁷Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: ¹⁸"A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more." (Matthew 2:1-7, 13-18)

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among the nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of heaven will be shaken. Then we will see the Son of Man coming..." (Luke 21:25-27)

Message:

The Gospel reading for last week in the Common Lectionary is a rather alarming one. Listen to what Luke writes:

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among the nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of heaven will be shaken. Then we will see the Son of Man coming..." (Luke 21:25-27).

These violent images and ominous predictions seem harsh and don't seem to relate to the Christmas celebrations we know and long for. We picture Christmas with the dreamy images of beautiful angels, lowing cattle, well-groomed sheep, and a gentle mother caressing her newborn child...

Sadly, life often seems more like Luke's description: clashing nations, bitter politics, violent interpersonal conflict, earthquakes and tsunami waves, fires and flooding.

On a more personal level, we're plagued by our own confusion and distress about conflicts we can't resolve, questions we can't answer, failures among ourselves and others that cause us to question the very Gospel we proclaim.

Advent, a season marked by the four Sundays preceding Christmas, is a time of waiting for Christ to bring his light into the darkest places of our lives and our world...with power to heal and light to dispel our darkness.

Matthew and Luke both link Jesus' birth to a firm historical framework. Luke (2:1) begins by dating the story to a census mandated by Caesar Augustus while Quirinius was governing in Syria. **Matthew (2)** shares the story of King Herod, the arrival of Magi and a massacre in Bethlehem. **Luke**

(3:1-2) also dates the advent of Jesus ministry to Tiberius Caesar, while Pontius Pilate was governing in Judea.

Placing these factors in history not so subtly hints at the worldwide significance of these seemingly trivial events that happened one day in Bethlehem.

Even more importantly, linking the story to time and space underscores God's sovereign control in and over history. Caesar Augustus, emperor of the world issues a decree that, unbeknownst to him, moves God's plan forward...and Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem to fulfill prophecy (**Micah 5:2**).

Wise men show up at Herod's door expecting to find a newborn child. Herod sends them to Bethlehem and secretly plans to kill the child—so God sends Joseph, Mary, and the baby to Egypt—to fulfill more prophecy (**Hosea 11:1**).

Realizing the wise men are not returning, Herod executes his plan and fulfills still more prophecy with his bone-chilling massacre (**Jeremiah 31:15**).

The idyllic scenario of our Christmas nativities is swallowed in stark reality. It was not a “silent night.”

THE EXAMINATION

As we think about this, we're going to continue to test your Christmas knowledge.

1. Caesar Augustus was the emperor of the entire Roman world. (True or False)
2. Caesar Augustus is better known in history as Octavian. (True or False)
3. Caesar Augustus is usually credited for initiating the *Pax Romana*. (True or False)
4. Censuses were fairly common in the Roman Empire. (True or False)
5. The reason for the census (in **Luke 2**) was: (Multiple choice – chose as many as apply)
 - a. To gauge the success of Augustus's program to raise the marriage and birth rates.
 - b. To provide correct information for the Roman taxation.
 - c. To identify potential candidates for inscription into the Roman Legion.
 - d. To provide population data for fair representation in the Roman Senate.
6. Mary and Joseph were both from the tribe of Judah, and they were both descendants of David. (True or False)

7. Herod the Great was an Edomite, a descendant of Esau, and part Jewish (True or False)
8. Herod the Great was a close friend of Caesar Augustus. (True or False)
9. Herod murdered his mother, his wife and three of his four sons. (True or False)
10. Herod had all the children in Bethlehem under two years killed. (True or False)

Let's examine some of these questions and their answers together

THE EXPLANATION

Caesar Augustus, the first person of notability, mentioned in Luke's Christmas story was neither a Palestinian, a Jew, a shepherd or a wise man. He was the **despised** Roman Emperor. And yet, it was Augustus' decision, 1500 miles away in Rome, which initiated the stream of human events that led to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.

Born **Gaius Octavius** in 63 B.C., Caesar Augustus is best known as **Octavian** to historians and as the emperor who called for a census at the time of Jesus birth. He was the grandnephew of Julius Caesar. Octavian's rise to power began when Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 B.C.

In his will, Julius Caesar named Octavian, his adopted **son**, as his heir. Initially, Octavian shared power with Marcus **Lepidus** and Mark **Antony** as a triumvirate (or board of three). Lepidus fell from power in 36 B.C. and was driven into exile. War broke out between Antony and Octavian. Antony allied himself with Cleopatra, queen of Egypt, but Octavian defeated them both at Actium in 31 B.C. Octavian conquered Egypt in 30 B.C.; Antony and Cleopatra both committed suicide.

The Roman Senate recognized Octavian as the **Supreme Ruler** (or Lord) and gave him the title and name, Caesar Augustus (i.e., exalted, or venerable one) in 27 B.C. He ruled until he died in A.D. 14 and was replaced by Tiberius (cf. **Luke 3:1**).

Augustus demonstrated extraordinary skill as a leader and administrator. He inaugurated the *Pax Romana* (i.e., Roman Peace) and an unprecedented period of stability throughout the Mediterranean region. The peace and relative safety of travel on Roman roads throughout the world proved a major factor for the rapid expansion of the Gospel message.

Augustus realized the marriage and birth rates were declining rapidly. Men were staying single, living an easy morality of promiscuity without having to make a commitment. He made promiscuity a crime (try that today), rewarded

husbands with three or more children; and denied single men the best seats at the games.

While censuses were fairly common in the Roman Empire, this one is commonly considered to be called both to check on the birth rates and to assist with taxation. The Greek *oikoumene* (NIV: *the Roman World*) lit. means “*the inhabited world*.” As Augustus reorganized his administration, he also conducted numerous local censuses.

Publius Sulpicius Quirinius was governor of Syria. According to Josephus, the best historian on these years, Quirinius was a **career** politician: appointed *Counsel to Rome* in 12 B.C.; proconsul in Asia in 4 B.C., and from 6-9 A.D. he governed Syria.

With significant evidence that Jesus was born in 4 B.C., this brings up some historic timing problems—

Quirinius, as governor of Syria, did conduct an extensive census in 6 A.D. but that would have been almost ten years too late. Historians have looked for answers. There are some plausible solutions – although scholars just don’t all agree on the same solution.

Some have found (increasing) evidence that Quirinius actually governed Syria on two occasions. Some translate the Greek here, “*while Quirinius was governing Syria*” and would also include the time he was proconsul of Asia (which included Syria). Some scholars think Quirinius was finishing up a census a previous governor initiated. The Greek “*prote*” can also be translated as “*before*” rather than “*first*”, so the census could have taken place *before* Quirinius was governor. These explanations all take into account the difficult political situation in Palestine and the continual transition of leadership.

King Herod ruled over Palestine for thirty-three years. Herod was an exceptionally **gifted** leader with **major** accomplishments. Whatever he did, it seemed to be just the right thing. For example, Herod advised Mark Antony to drop Cleopatra and make peace with Rome (Antony should have taken the advice, he didn’t). Augustus was so impressed with Herod’s political abilities, they became close friends.

In years of famine, Herod remitted taxes and provided food for Israel; once he even sold the silverware in his palace to buy the food for the people of Jerusalem. He erected palaces, temples, aqueducts, cities, a magnificent port in Caesarea that improved trade and commerce, and built a great new temple in Jerusalem for the Jews. All of this meant huge taxes, but it also provided jobs.

In response to the invasions of Parthians and Trachonites and his increasing paranoia, Herod built fortresses all along his eastern border:

Masada, Myrcanum. Machaerus, and the Herodium (just outside Bethlehem). They provided him a secure retreat in case of trouble.

He was **loved** by Rome—so much so they gave him the title, “*Herod the Great*”; but no matter what he did, he was profoundly **hated** by the Jews.

Although he was half-Jewish, he was also half Gentile (and 1% Gentile and/or Roman would have been too much for the Jews of his day), his taxes were too oppressive, and he was a descendant of Esau—a despised Edomite sitting on David’s throne! (Understand: Edom and Esau are synonyms for evil and betrayal to the Jews). Herod’s vicious tyranny brought him little love—even from his own family.

During his later years, he became extremely **paranoid**. He repeatedly asked Rome for permission to kill two of his sons for treason; he ended up killing most of his **family** including his wife and three of his four sons. He wasn’t hesitant to kill anyone who got in his way – and that included hundreds of Jewish citizens.

When word got out that an unknown baby might usurp his throne, he had all the boy **babies** two years old and under killed in Bethlehem. In a town of about 2-300, about 6-8 male babies would likely have been slain. But it was enough for Herod to emerge as the “monster” in the Christmas story.

ELUCIDATION

The answers to our questions are:

1. Caesar Augustus was the emperor of the entire Roman world. (True)
2. Caesar Augustus is better known in history as Octavian. (True)
3. Caesar Augustus is usually credited for initiating the *Pax Romana*. (True)
4. Censuses were fairly common in the Roman Empire. (True)
5. The reason for the census (in **Luke 2**) was: (Multiple choice – chose as many as apply) (A and B)
 - a. To gauge the success of Augustus’s program to raise the marriage and birth rates.
 - b. To provide correct information for the Roman taxation.
 - c. To identify potential candidates for inscription into the Roman Legion.
 - d. To provide data for fair representation in the Roman Senate.
6. Mary and Joseph were both from the tribe of Judah, and they were both descendants of David. (True)
7. Herod the Great was an Edomite, a descendant of Esau, and part Jewish. (True)

8. Herod the Great was a close friend of Caesar Augustus. (True)
9. Herod murdered his mother, his wife and three of his four sons. (True)
10. Herod had all the children in Bethlehem under two years killed. (Trick question. False – only the males)

The Synoptic writers set this story up as a study in contrasts (underscoring the choices we must all make).

Choose **Herod** or **God**. The kingdom of this world or the Kingdom of God? The writers want us to realize **Herod's** plans came to an end; **God's** plans still continue to be fulfilled. God promised "*the house of Jacob will be a fire, the house of Joseph a flame, [but] the house of Esau will be stubble...*" (**Obadiah 18**). Herod planned to kill the baby Jesus; God used his plot to fulfill his prophecy: "*Out of Egypt I called my son*" (**Matt. 2:15**) (It is a reminder of the Exodus deliverance story. Matthew, writing to the Hebrews, is setting Jesus up as the real, the new Moses).

Herod worried no one would mourn his death (it was a justified concern). He issued orders from his deathbed that leaders from all over Judea were to be locked inside the great hippodrome at Jericho. When he died, archers were to massacre thousands in cold blood so there would be widespread mourning and weeping associated with his death.

When Herod died in 4 B.C. from a loathsome disease that ulcerated his body, the thousands confined in the hippodrome were all released unharmed. Meanwhile, the baby who was supposed to die in Bethlehem was alive and well in Egypt and would one day be King – a far greater king than Herod.

Choose **dating** your Calendar **A.U.C.** or **A.D.** At the time of Caesar Augustus' death in 14 A.D., Jesus was about 18-19 years old, an apprentice carpenter (i.e., a *tecton*) in Nazareth. Jesus was an unknown, born in an unknown city to unknown parents. The emperor had likely never heard of him—or his birth.

Augustus would have been astonished to learn that history would assign his death to the year 14 A.D. (*anno domini*, "*in the year of the Lord*") rather than the Roman date 767 A.U.C. (*ab urbe condita*, "*from the founding of the city [of Rome]*").

He would also have been amazed that future generations would wish each other a "Merry Christmas" rather than "Io Saturnalia!" (The Io Saturnalia, honoring the god Saturn, was the great end-of-the-year festival in Rome celebrated from December 17-23 that centered around a holiday that includes holly, mistletoe, evergreens, the exchange of gifts, and lots of partying, feasting, and drinking – sound familiar?).

Choose the **Herodian** (an impressive fortress) or the **Manger** (a major humiliation). **Herod** (and all he represents and offers) or **Jesus** (and all he

represents and offers)? Herod lived with awesome earthly power at his disposal; he literally held one's life and/or death in his hands. Just outside of Bethlehem was one of Herod's huge fortress-palaces. (**Pictures**). It visually overshadowed everything in little Bethlehem. It symbolized his power. Herod's life involved sacrificing others to bring him honor and glory. Today, Herod's glory and strength have been all but forgotten; today, few people remember his accomplishments.

By contrast, the small home in which Jesus was born, the manger in which he was laid, symbolizes his servant nature. Jesus neither had nor coveted the power the world covets. Jesus' life revolved around sacrificing himself so the world could know His Father. Jesus' sacrifice continues to impact millions; even non-believers recognize him by name.

Choose the world's **peace** (Pax Romana) or the **Peace** of God (Luke 2:14). Following the civil war with Mark Antony and Cleopatra, Rome enjoyed a lengthy era of peace and prosperity. This peace, known as the *Pax Augustus* or the *Pax Romano*, was an external peace. It lasted for most of the forty-four years of Augustus' rule. Since that day there have been less than twenty years of world peace – years where fighting was not happening somewhere.

There was also a peace promised by angels "*Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.*" This "*peace of God which transcends all understanding...*" (**Philippians 2:7**) is an internal peace. This is a peace that fulfills, an uninterrupted peace that lasts through life and eternity; a peace filled with hope, a peace that comes from the promised Prince of Peace (**Isaiah 9:6**).

Caesar Augustus, Publius Quirinius, and King Herod have all died and left their marble palaces behind. They were made of millions of tons of stones—quarried, chiseled with distinctive ornamentation, and set into magnificent buildings; by contrast, Jesus of Nazareth left "*living stones*" spread around the world (cf. **I Peter 2:5f**).

Scripture, the Gospel, God and his Son Jesus, offer us and the world a clear choice. Choose the Roman Empire (the world and all the pleasures and enticements it offers) that now lies in **shambles** OR choose Jesus' kingdom – a kingdom born in a humble home in Bethlehem that is still growing and will **stand forever**. Your choice. You can't have both – it is one or the other. You do need to choose. Choose well. Choose now. Your **soul** and your **eternity** depend on it.