

We've been in a series over the past few weeks on the characters of Christmas. We've looked at Zechariah and Elizabeth, at Mary, and at the angels who are involved in the Christmas story. And today we turn our attention to one of the background characters. It's typical, maybe, for us to focus on the characters who were closest to the action, but there are other characters in the Christmas story who play a necessary role, even if they never show up in the nativity scene, and even if they themselves are ignorant of the role they are playing. When Luke came to the point of narrating the birth of Jesus in Luke chapter 2, the first character he mentions is Caesar Augustus. The Emperor of Rome. Luke didn't have to narrate the birth of Jesus like this. None of the other gospel writers care to mention Augustus. His name only appears one time in all of the New Testament, so he's never mentioned again in connection with anything having to do with Jesus. But for some reason, when it came to the point of telling this story, Luke wanted to set side by side the most powerful person in the world at that time, Caesar Augustus, with Jesus, born in a stable, laid in a manger. Luke wanted to set the historical context on the scale of the entire world, within the scope of international politics and emperors, before narrowing the scope to a baby in Bethlehem.

And one of the things that I love about the Christmas story, especially the way that Luke tells the story, is that it's such a good example of God dipping down into the seeming randomness of life, and the chaos of life, the insignificance of this or that circumstance, and reminding the world that history is unfolding according to God's purposes. That history moves forward at God's pace and in His timing. The Christmas story is a picture of how God engineers and designs the seemingly random events of history into a story that God is telling. Christmas came to pass in a specific time, in a specific place, with specific people involved in the events. There was a specific historical setting surrounding Jesus' birth. And just like the history that we live in, the history surrounding Jesus' birth probably looked chaotic and random to the people there on the ground.

Because of course, that's how life looks to all of us sometimes. The events of life seem so random. Whenever life hands us something that we weren't expecting, especially something that's painful. The one thing we can't ever seem to find is a satisfactory answer to the question, "Why?" We might even look at someone else's life and we think, why did they get sick and not me? Why did I lose my job and not him? Why did this person die and not this other person? It would've made more sense the other way around. And yet why do we think it should make sense? Isn't it strange that really regardless of what you believe, and usually regardless of whether you're a Christian or not, we find ourselves digging around in the events of life looking for some kind of purpose in it. Something deep within us resonates with the Christmas story, because in it we see just a glimpse of the grand design that God is weaving out of the fabric of history.

Let's listen to how Luke tells the story of Jesus' birth. Luke writes in chapter two verse one: 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.

You see how Luke doesn't just start with the events on the ground in Bethlehem? Instead, he starts with the context of world powers, and then there is a progression. A progression from the Roman World, down to Syria, down to Galilee, to Nazareth, to Bethlehem. This way of setting the context of the story invites us to wonder about the scale and scope of Jesus' significance, about the possibility of this birth having redemptive significance for not just Galilee and Judea, but for the whole world.

And yet, on the ground in Bethlehem, this all would have seemed a bit unplanned. Having to deliver the baby while you're away from home because you had to take a last minute trip somewhere because of some deadline required by the government. It would be like the IRS requiring everyone to make a trip back to their hometown before the April 15th filing deadline. Normally the last thing you want is to have a baby while travelling. You would try to get everything ready and prepared for the baby and then you would just wait for the day to arrive, and you'd be close to family and friends and the hospital. But here are Mary and Joseph travelling and all they see are no vacancy signs. Was it a hastily put together trip? No time to arrange for a place to sleep? The whole thing looks terribly unplanned.

Have you ever been on a trip and realized that you forgot to plan a key detail related to your travel? I remember my wife, Candice and I, when we were 19 years old and very recently married. And the first time we went to stay in a hotel after our honeymoon. We just stopped on the way to somewhere else and we were gonna get a room for the night, and they turned us away. Not because they didn't have any rooms, but because they said there had to be at least one adult staying in the room, and for them, that meant you had to be at least 21 years old. So, we weren't 21, we couldn't get a room. It was just what it was. We should've planned ahead.

Is that what people told Mary and Joseph? You should've planned better. The town is packed. Why didn't you get here earlier? I suppose you could stay with the animals. A lot of houses had little shelters for animals, it would be like a garage or a parking lot. You've got to have some place to put your transportation. Animals were transportation. We have to have a place to put our cars, and they had to have some place to put their animals. That's how it was. And to the people there in the little town of Bethlehem, maybe it looked unplanned or chaotic, a whole nation having to go register because of a census. To the people in the midst of the story, maybe they didn't see where all this was headed. But Luke knew. He knew it wasn't random.

Seven hundred years before this, before there was even a Roman empire, the prophet Micah was moved by the Lord to write a prophecy about the Messiah. Every Jewish person knew this prophecy from Micah saying that out of Bethlehem, even 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. Luke knew that all of this wasn't unplanned. It wasn't random. He knew that somehow the decree that came down from none other than Caesar Augustus himself, had been timed exactly right to put Mary and Joseph exactly where God intended them to be that night. Luke mentions the census four times in these verses. He is purposefully setting next to each other the world of Emperor Augustus and the world of divine purpose.

Now, when we hear the name Caesar Augustus, we don't know who that really is, but Luke's readers knew. Caesar Augustus was born in 63 B.C., and his given name was Gaius Octavius. He's usually called Octavian. Octavian was the son of Julius Caesar's niece, which means he was born in high places as the great nephew to a very powerful Roman general. As most of us learned in school, one of the only things

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we really remember about Julius Caesar is the way that he died. He was assassinated by members of the Roman Senate on the steps of the Senate, on March 15th, 44 BC. Well, as it turns out. For whatever reason, Julius Caesar had a particular affinity for the young Octavian, and after his death, it was revealed that in Julius's will, he had adopted Octavian as his only legitimate son, which means that all of his wealth and all of his titles would be left to his great-nephew.

At this point, Octavian took on his great uncle's title, and he became Gaius Julius Caesar. And in the years following, Octavian began to change the basic structure of the empire. After the battle of Actium in 31 BC, he defeated Marc Antony, and became the sole ruler of the empire. He changed the constitution of Rome so that he became the emperor, and in this way, Rome became an empire, and Octavian became Rome's very first emperor. It was around this time that the Senate voted to establish Julius Caesar as a divine being. That whenever he was referred to, he would be called, the divine Julius. This, of course, meant that Octavian, as the adopted son of the divine Julius, would be known around the Roman world as the son of the divine, or in other words, the son of a god. It was then that he received the name Augustus, which means sacred. It was a religious term, meant to remind people of his connection to the divine, as the son of a god. In one inscription called the Myrian Inscription, he is called the Divine Augustus, son of a god, and savior of the whole world.

And, indeed, Octavian was a keen political ruler. He ushered in a time of peace that was unparalleled in the ancient world. The Pax Romana, or Roman Peace, was a golden age of stability and prosperity that lasted 200 years. He put an end to civil wars, he expanded a massive network of Roman roads and effective transportation systems throughout the empire. For the first time in history a person could travel in relative safety on roads from one side of the empire to the other. Trade and prosperity increased.

And along with this, Octavian wanted to establish a system for the taxation of the entire empire. There had never been a census of the entire Roman world before Augustus came to power. In the past, getting a count of people was nearly impossible. And because of this, the way that taxes were collected was usually imprecise, especially in the outer provinces, like Judea. But for reasons no one will probably ever know, Caesar Augustus decided to change the tax structure of the empire and start taxing individuals, which required everyone to register, not just once, but at regular intervals, every so many years. And this may be why Luke is telling us which census, this was the first census while Quirinius was governor.

But little did Caesar Augustus know, that with all of his power and all of his authority to command the whole Roman world with a decree, his census was just the setup for God's story. His census would become the backdrop, the context, the setting, in a story about Joseph, leaving the town of Nazareth, going back to Bethlehem where he was from. To be there just at the right time. It was critical that Joseph and Mary go to Bethlehem, so that they would be there when the Messiah was born so that the prophecy of Micah would come to pass.

Little did Caesar Augustus know that he was being moved by the Spirit of God to do exactly what he did on time, on schedule to effect exactly the result God wanted. So that, as Paul says in Galatians 4, Jesus' coming happened in the fullness of time. When the conditions were exactly right. There were a few days in which Joseph and Mary had to be in Bethlehem, right at the very time of the birth of the child. God knew exactly when that moment was, exactly when that day was.

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What made Julius Caesar decide to adopt Octavian? What transpired so that Julius was assassinated and Octavian came to power precisely when he did? What made him decide to change the tax structure when he did? Any number of things could have interrupted the plan and Jesus probably wouldn't have been born in Bethlehem. But he was. The sheer number of things God had to arrange is staggering. God knew how long it would take to get the registration machinery in place. To establish the bureaucracy which would be needed to take a census in the provinces like Judea. God knew what sort of deadlines would be set for the province of Judea, because a census could take years. God knew how long it would take for that little couple to trek those eighty-five to ninety miles. Every single detail was in the hand of Almighty God. And God still directs history and He still holds every king, every ruler in His hand for His own purposes.

On one level, the journey to Bethlehem is because of the almighty decree of Augustus. But on the other hand, even the most powerful ruler in the world at the time is unwittingly a pawn made to serve a purpose that he knows nothing about. The purpose of God. It's ironic, and Luke probably wrote this with a smirk, that the one who was called falsely, the son of a god. That very one becomes a major player in bringing about the prophecy of the birth of the real Son of God.

Caesar Augustus would never have imagined that the unprecedented infrastructure of the entire Roman world, that was just the setup for the gospel of the true Savior to be spread throughout the world. It would have been inconceivable to Augustus that the city of Rome, 2000 years later, would be a tourist attraction decorated everywhere you look with crosses, and that every Christmas, his name would be spoken all over the world as simply a footnote in the story of a Jewish carpenter's trip to Bethlehem.

But again, to the people in Bethlehem that night, this moment that was 700 years in the making, it all looked rather unplanned. It looked chaotic.

For some of you, you would say, Collin, within the past 2 or 3 weeks as I've approached the Christmas season, I've been handed something I was not expecting. For some of you, it might have been a job loss. For some of you, all of a sudden there's tension in your marriage and you didn't see it coming. For some of you, you got bad news. For some of you, you got bad news about your health, or the health of a child, or the health of a parent, or the health of someone you love. For some of you, it's something at work. But whatever it is, now you're staring at something, and if you were honest, you'd say, it's very difficult for me to trust God with this staring me in the face. It's very difficult to trust God because of all of the uncertainty this brings into my life, or my marriage, or all of the uncertainty this brings into the life of my children all the uncertainty this brings into my career all the uncertainty it brings into my future.

But, can you imagine saying to God, "God, I see that you can engineer the circumstances of the entire Roman empire in order to bring a seven hundred year old prophecy to fulfillment. But can you really manage my situation? My finances? My marriage? My health? My future?"

Whatever it is that has taken you by surprise. God was not surprised. Whatever it is that you would say, I don't know exactly what to do about this because my hands are tied here. It looks like there's nothing I can do. But even though your hands are tied. God's hands are not tied. My knowledge is limited, God's knowledge is not. Our strength is finite, God's power is not.

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Whatever it is that you would say, this was not part of the plan. This isn't how it was supposed to work out. Let me tell you this. Just because it wasn't in your plan, doesn't mean that God doesn't have a plan. It just means you don't know it, yet. Just because you don't see the purpose, doesn't mean there isn't one. It just means you don't see it, yet.

Whatever it is that would make you say in your life, really, God? I thought you were with me. If you were really with me, if God was really with me, then this wouldn't have happened. But if anyone in all of history could have said that, it would have been Mary. I mean, this is literally, God with us. Jesus is in Mary's womb. If God was with us, wouldn't we be able to find a place to stay for the night? But God was most certainly with them, and yet, here they are in a stable in Bethlehem.

It's interesting. As far as we know, an angel only appeared to Mary one time to explain what God was going to do, but never again did an angel appear to Mary. God never explained any other parts of the plan to her (except for Simeon's oracle). I can't imagine what Mary thought when she saw her son crucified. We romanticize it. And we know it all worked out, but she stood there and watched it. Did she remember the words of the angel, and ask God, but the angel said his kingdom shall never end? The angel said he would reign forever? Jesus' hands were tied, his strength was sapped, his power restrained, the limits of flesh were felt by the infinite God. And in those moments, it was just another random act of Roman violence with no good purpose in sight. And yet had God lost control? No. This was the very epicenter of God's activity. The very moment when it looked like everything was lost and God had lost control was at the crosshairs of God's greatest involvement in the world as he sent his son into this world to pay for the sins of mankind.

Have you taken a moment yet this Christmas to remember that all of it, Caesar's decree, Joseph's journey, Mary and the manger, Jesus and the cross. All of it was for you, for me, for anyone who would look through the chaos of it and trust that behind it all was God's mercy, God's grace, God's love. Behind every other purpose stands God's love. Caesar decreed, but it was God's love that decided the outcome. Joseph journeyed, but it was God's love that determined the destination.

All the threads that make up the fabric of history are being woven together in a tapestry to display the grand design, which is the infinite and overwhelming love of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

At Christmas we are reminded that even when it seems random, even when it seems purposeless, even when it seems to have no good end. Even when it seems that this is an unredeemable illness. This is an unredeemable death. This is an unredeemable job loss. This is an unredeemable situation. There's nothing good that can come from this and there's no way this is part of some overarching plan.

At Christmas we're reminded that God is working out his plan and his purpose in the randomness and the chaos of the world and of our lives in a way and on a scale that we will probably never see in this life. But we can know and trust, because of the manger and the cross, that behind it all is always God's mercy, God's grace, and ultimately, God's love. Let's pray.