



Home : Sermons : Oct 2, 2005

One Night in Bethlehem - Luke 2:1-20

Introduction - One of the great subplots in the story of the birth of our Savior is the paradox of God's sovereignty and man's free will. Who was the most free, autonomous, powerful man in the world at this time? Without exception, Caesar was. And how hard did God have to work to accomplish His kingdom purposes through this man? This is the great twist, the great irony, the great comedy of the gospel. Yes, kingdoms are at war. But no, there is absolutely no uncertainty as to the outcome. Joy and terror are the result.

The Battle of the Kingdoms (v1-7) - The great antithesis is reaching its zenith here. The city of man, born of the seed of the serpent, is in complete control. The city of God, born of the seed of the woman, is about to finally and directly enter into human history.

Caesar Augustus - He was the adopted son of Julius Caesar. After a bloody civil war, Augustus turned the Roman republic into an empire, with himself at the head proclaiming that he had brought justice and peace to the whole world. Declaring his dead father to be divine, he framed himself as '*son of god.*' Poets wrote songs about the new era and historians told the long story of Rome's rise to greatness, climaxing of course with Augustus himself, known as the '*savior of the world.*' This god-king can tell "*all the world*" that they should be registered.

Jesus of Bethlehem - This '*bastard*' son was brought into the world boasting nothing. Bethlehem is just a little town outside of Jerusalem and there is no room in human society even for his birth - he is placed in a feeding trough. But this will be the sign. Why are Joseph and Mary and Jesus in Bethlehem? Because of Caesar's decree (v1) or because of God's omniscient plan (Mic 5:2)?

Declarations (vv8-20) - A decree went out from Caesar to all the world, and all the world was moving. A decree went out from an angel, but only to a band of low-class shepherds in the hills outside a small town in the middle of the night. Caesar's decree brought Mary to Bethlehem, but the angel's decree brought the shepherds to Jesus.

Rival King - Jesus is being revealed as the rival to Caesar. He is the son of David the king (v4, 11, 1:27). His birth is announced by a multitude of heavenly armies, angelic heralds, lights in the sky of darkness. Augustus's reign was hailed as good news, a savior had come, and His Pax Romana had brought peace on earth. But the gospel of Jesus is announced as well, a Savior, the anointed One, the Lord.

The Joy of Christmas - As it was for Mary, there are many things for us to ponder in this story. But notice the dominant response in these first two chapters: singing and joy. The angel brings good news of great joy. Everybody is writing and singing songs of joy, deliverance, hope and peace. John is leaping in his mother's womb (is he dancing like David before the glory of God?) Family, friends, shepherds, and angels are rejoicing, fearing, wondering, and declaring this wonderful news. One author wrote, "*the joy of Christmas looks a lot like giddiness, just as the joy of Pentecost could be mistaken for drunkenness.*" And we would do well in our celebrations, both weekly and annually, individually and corporately, to let it out a bit more. Permission granted. Immanuel has come into our midst, stooping low to meet us where we are.

Stooping So Low - Just as in His exaltation nothing would be above Him as God, so Christ's humiliation was so low that nothing would be below Him as a man. No one is outside His reach - no class, category, or rank. There is no one to whom Jesus will say, "I cannot identify with you down there." (Phil 2:1-11). And this is exactly how his disciples are to live as well.

The Terror of Christmas - The Caesar's of this world are put on notice. Christmas cards should cause the unbelieving rulers of this world to pale with dread and shake with fear. Their lack of such a response only points to their ignorance - but let us not be ignorant with them. God was and is declaring the New Empire, the World-rule, the King of kings. And He has made clear, in an almost humorous manner, that nothing, absolutely nothing, can stand in the way of His purposes (Ps 33:7-17, Is 40:1-17). Caesar issued a decree that brought about the fulfillment of God's prophesy. How much more can we rest in the knowledge that "*nothing can separate us from the love of God?*"

At the same time, "terror" is not an overstatement. Consider what Herod would do. Consider what Judas would do, what

Pontius Pilate would do. Consider what good, upstanding Jews would do. Consider what Nero would later do. Consider what happens to followers of this God-man today all over the world.

Armed Exaltation - Of all the glorious songs we might have heard, were we covering the story of Jesus as eyewitnesses or journalists, none could have surpassed the sound of a multitude of heavenly armies praising God. It would not only have been glorious and beautiful. It would have been strong and militant. It was the sound of the gospel. And it was the sound of an army. And this sound pleases our God.

Dave Hatcher - ~~Christmas Eve~~ October 2, 2005