



Luke 2:1-7, 21  
 The Gifts of Christmas: Luke  
 “Really Good News”

Rev. Brian North  
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 Christmas Eve

Pray. So, I want to start tonight’s message with a confession: The Christmas Eve sermon is always one of the most difficult ones for me to write. How do I preach an engaging sermon on a piece of Biblical history that some of you have heard sermons on literally 80 times? Maybe we should instead just skip the sermon and go straight to lighting our candles. For some of you, that would be a welcomed Christmas gift from me. But, I am confident that God would like me to share a message related to the birth of Jesus, and God’s thoughts matters more than anyone else’s 😊. Not trying to offend anyone...it’s just the truth.

So, as we read in these first few verses of Luke 2, he grounds Jesus’ birth in the real world, in a particular place and time: Israel and during the Roman empire, under the rule of Caesar Augustus, while Quirinius governing Syria. We also know from Matthew 2:1 that it’s during the time of King Herod’s reign over part of Israel, under the authority of the Roman Empire. Between that information and all the real-world settings that we read about throughout the gospels (towns that still exist today, the temple, synagogues, and so forth): it is clear that Jesus, including his birth, is not a mythological figure like Zeus or Hercules or any other god of this, that, or the other thing. God the creator and master of the universe came in the person of Jesus, and he lived and walked in a particular place at a particular time, living a life marked by love, truth, and grace, inviting people to follow him.

**Further grounding this in a particular time and place, there is a census Luke mentions in verse 2.** Roman censuses were for taxation and administrative purposes, and were fairly common – every few years, but not regularly scheduled, like the U.S. Census which has been conducted every 10 years since 1790. Sometimes the Roman censuses were for the whole empire, in between those were regional ones. There are two known empire-wide censuses that could be the one Luke refers to here: one that began in 8 B.C., and one that began in 6 A.D. The 6 A.D, one was near the start of Quirinius’ governorship of Syria, which Luke mentions. So, we would presume it’s the 6 A.D. census that is meant at Jesus’ birth, because of Quirinius’s governing.

A problem arises, however: **Luke 1:5 and Matthew 2:1 tells us Jesus was born during King Herod’s reign, and he died in 4 B.C. – after the 8 B.C. census, but 10 years prior to Quirinius’ governorship and the 6 A.D. census as Luke describes.** Most scholars point to that earlier census as the one that set the stage for Mary and Joseph to go to Bethlehem, which means we need to understand Luke’s mentioning of Quirinius.

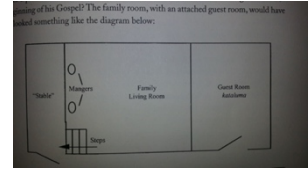
There are a couple ways to reconcile this, both of them with both Biblical and historical evidence to support them. From archaeological discoveries, we know Quirinius was a high-ranking Syrian military officer starting in 12 B.C., nearly 18 years before he became the governor. He may have had governing responsibilities in that role, and perhaps that is what Luke refers to. And Luke’s text supports this because the Greek doesn’t actually say that Quirinius was governor, but that he was “governing.” So, his military position that began in 12 B.C. may have had some “governing” to it, and may very well be what Luke intends here, and not the later census when he was governor, but a decade after Herod’s death. That also fits the language that this is the “first” census while he was governing.

There’s another possibility: in verse 2, Luke writes that this census when Jesus was born was the “protos” census while Quirinius was governing. One meaning of “Protos” is “first”, but it can also mean “before”. And if translated “before”, the sentence would read: **“This was the census taken before (protos) Quirinius was governing”**...again pointing us to the census in 8 B.C. associated with King Herod.<sup>1</sup>

The second thing I want to look at is in verse 7 where Luke says there was “no guest room available” for them. Many of us grew up reading, “There was no room at the Inn” – as in, no room at the local Motel 6 (which I just learned a couple weeks ago was named “Motel 6” because that’s how much it used to cost to stay a night!). The innkeeper, who is never mentioned anywhere, is assumed because an inn must have an innkeeper. But: **The word here, “kataluma,” can mean “inn” as in motel, but it also means “guestroom.”** It makes sense that it could be used with both meanings – after all, a motel is like a collection of guestrooms. There’s another Greek word that explicitly means “inn”, and Luke uses it later on in his gospel account. So if he’d really

meant an “inn” here, he could have used that word. But he doesn’t. He uses kataluma: guest room.

And from archaeological digs (**Photo**) we know that common home construction of the day had the stable connected to what you and I would probably call the living room, with the living room raised two or three steps, and the manger in the floor of the living room right next to the stable. Jesus was almost certainly born in the stable, or in the living room, and then placed in the manger on the floor of the living room.



Ok, I know you all didn’t come here tonight for a history lesson. Well, in a way you did...we’re celebrating the birth of Jesus and that happened about 2,000 years ago. But you weren’t likely expecting a lesson on ancient governing officials and Greek vocabulary. **But I hope going through this helps you trust what we read – because if we can’t trust the Bible, then what’s the point of following Jesus or even being here?** And as we talked about a few Sundays ago when we started this series: Luke opens his gospel by telling his friend Theophilus, for whom he’s writing this, that he did a thorough investigation and even spoke with eyewitnesses to the things that he writes about, so he could write an “orderly account.” He wants Theophilus to have solid, trustworthy information about Jesus on which to base his faith.

And so, in light of this, what I’d say at this point is related to that theme of trust: that you can trust Jesus. We can trust the gospel accounts of his life, and the rest of the New Testament that is birthed out of his ministry, and we can trust Jesus, that all these writings are centered on. **Jesus is trustworthy.** Of course, that begs the question, “What should I trust Jesus for?” I realize many of us might know what we trust Jesus for and why we trust him...but if a person has limited, misguided, or no prior knowledge of Jesus, we might seriously wonder, “What should I consider trusting him for? Why trust him?”

And I would say, that: **The reason we each ought to trust him is found in his name: Jesus.** We talked about this a few weeks ago, but let me reiterate. Besides what Luke tells us, Matthew 1:21 also reiterates that his name will be Jesus, and then adds “...because he will save people from their sins.” Right

there is the reason to trust Jesus: because he saves us from our sins.”

Literally, the name Jesus, and the related Hebrew name Yehoshua, means “God saves.”

And “Christ” is not his last name. That’s a title – “Jesus the Christ” would be the more proper way to put it. “Christ” is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew “Messiah” and they both mean “anointed one” or “chosen one.” So, to speak of Jesus Christ is to speak of one who is anointed to save. His name is who he is and it’s what his mission is. He is the anointed one – the Christ – and he’s anointed for a purpose: to save. This is all God’s doing. It’s his grace. It’s the gift that God gives. It does beg the question: who or what is saved? Well: **From Jesus’ ministry and the rest of the New Testament we see that it’s people who recognize they’re in need of a savior, in need of being saved from themselves and their sin.** Oftentimes, we don’t like to acknowledge that we need any saving or rescuing. That’s just part of the problem with pride. But with humility comes a recognition that we do need saving, and that we can’t save ourselves.

The good news of Jesus is that he can save us from our sin. God has given him to us, as the one anointed for this thing that we cannot do ourselves. We need all the help and saving we can get – whether it’s in our families, our places of work or school, a health scare we’re facing right now, financial struggles...and the sin in our lives – from the obvious ones to the ones we try and hide even from ourselves. There are all kinds of things we need help to get through or to be saved from. The ultimate one is death. Jesus saves us even there. Not by eliminating it, but by bringing us through it, to the other side into the presence of God. **We can’t make ourselves holy and righteous to be in the presence of a holy and righteous God for all eternity. Jesus does that. He saves us.** It’s the job he’s anointed for. It’s his life, death, and resurrection that ultimately validate this claim of eternal salvation through faith in Jesus, but it all starts with his birth. It’s the job he was born for. It’s the gift he gives you, and he wants you to receive it by trusting him.

Now, some people are better at receiving gifts than others. I’m a good gift receiver. For instance, if my wife were to get me a Ferrari or a Lamborghini for Christmas...and believe me that is NOT happening...but hypothetically,

if she did, I would receive that gift *really well*. And some of you are like, “Duh. Who wouldn’t?” But some people don’t. A lot of people who own cars like that just park them in their garage and rarely drive them. Instead, they just go into the garage occasionally, sit in a chair, smoke a cigar, and look at it. Maybe rub their hand over it a bit or polish it up. I’m serious. A guy who grew up in our church used to be a Lamborghini repair technician – he’s the one who told me this is how most Lambo owners are. What shame! If my wife got me a Lambo – I’m *using* it. I’m *driving* that thing the way it’s meant to be driven. I might end up in jail as a result...but I’m driving it. **Photo.**



**So, I ask you (and I ask this of myself): are you a good gift receiver when it comes to**

**Jesus?** Do we respond with thanksgiving and demonstrate that thankful heart by following Jesus, apprenticing to him, and letting him shape our lives to be more and more like his? Because that’s what trusting him looks like. “Trust” steps out and follows Jesus, lives as he lives, does what he does. So, I hope and pray this Christmas you know Jesus’ saving presence and work in your life. It’s really good news! It’s a really good gift! Let’s receive the gift he offers, and receive it well: Come to the Lord in faith, and trust him, because Jesus Christ the one who is anointed to save you. Let’s pray...Amen.

<sup>1</sup> <https://biblearchaeologyreport.com/2019/12/19/quirinius-an-archaeological-biography/#:~:text=Some%20have%20suggested%20he%20may,his%20well%2Dknown%20census.> Great article with lots of scholarship supporting it.