

Journey for the Ages

- I drove my family as far as Nevada four years ago, and then they went into California for a day without me because I was sick. On the way out there, we stopped in Colorado, to see Pike's Peak and to visit Focus on the Family. We stopped in Arizona to see the Grand Canyon. We went by the Hoover Dam outside of Las Vegas. And we did all of that in less than 10 days. Then on the way back we stopped in New Mexico and visited the quaint historic town of Santa Fe. We drove to Amarillo, Texas, and saw the outdoor drama, "Texas." Then we spent one night in Arkansas with the Hermans, a family that left Antioch a few years earlier and moved to Little Rock. Total time of trip: 13 days. Miles: almost exactly 6000. We did that as a way of celebrating 25 years of marriage, and took the kids along. And we brought them all back! We didn't have to do it...we chose to make this journey. We came back with hundreds of pictures and memories. We added a layer of insulation, if you will, to our family, protection from those things in this world that work against the family and will break it down and destroy if it possible. I am thankful for that journey and wouldn't trade anything for it. But there is another journey that I want to tell you about that is even more exciting. It was only about 100 miles, but it took almost as long one way as our 6000 mile journey took. This was not a journey for pleasure. There was no sightseeing along the way, no leisurely nights in comfortable hotels that had continental breakfasts and indoor pools...just 8-10 days of hard travel through sometimes treacherous terrain...on foot. But what a journey it was. This family came back with no pictures, but with something much more precious. They came back with the real thing, not a kodachrome image on glossy paper. Imagine if the Fox family had gone out to see the Grand Canyon and had been able to bring it back with us. Imagine looking out the back door of the church and seeing, not the University Drive bypass, but the Grand Canyon! Or, instead of Bass Mountain, you could look to the south and see Pike's Peak. The family that journeyed to Bethlehem came back with the Savior.

- Luke 2:1-7
- Let's look at the birth narrative this morning and answer a few questions about the 5 W's: the who, what, when, where and why of the story. You know from your instruction in school that a good news story will answer those five basic questions. The "why" is not always answered by the media simply because the answer is not known. But when we look at this story, we can speak with confidence on all five of these questions, including the 'why.' Watch out, though, and listen up! Because the answers may surprise you.

1. Who is the subject of this story?

- The lead sentence of a news story is supposed to include as many of the 5 W's as possible, but at the very least it will include the who and the what. If this passage from Luke's gospel were to appear in the Burlington paper as hard news, you would immediately assume from the opening sentence that the most important person in the story was Caesar Augustus. And the most important action that he took was making a decree that all the world should be taxed. So, the who is the ruler of the known world. The what is a tax. That's it, isn't it? The rest is just details, human interest stuff, filler material. There's a young couple who has to go back to his home town and register and while there, she gives birth to a baby boy. Interesting, but not what everybody is talking about around the water cooler. The real news is this tax that the government is laying on everybody, and the inconvenience that it is for families or at least heads of households to travel miles from their residence to register. That's the news of the day, the effect that the decisions of those in authority have on my lifestyle and my comfort and my bank account.
- Augustus was the Emperor of the Roman Empire. Luke's statement, that Augustus decreed that "all the world" should be taxed, was not far off. The Roman Empire was vast and powerful, and the man who sat atop the empire had immense power. Caesar Augustus was adopted by his uncle, Julius Caesar, and made his heir. Julius Caesar was murdered in 44 BC, and in 43 B.C., Octavian, Marcus Antonius

and another Roman General, Marcus Lepidus, formed the second Triumvirate to rule Rome. After taking power, the Triumvirate proscribed and slaughtered thousands of political enemies, firmly establishing their control of the Roman government. Rome achieved great glory under Octavian/Augustus. He restored peace after 100 years of civil war; maintained an honest government and a sound currency system; extended the highway system connecting Rome with its far-flung empire; developed an efficient postal service; fostered free trade among the provinces; and built many bridges, aqueducts and buildings adorned with beautiful works of art created in the classical style. Literature flourished with writers including Virgil, Horace, and Ovid, all living under the emperor's patronage. The empire expanded under Augustus and after his death, the people of the Roman Empire worshipped Augustus as a god.

- Yes, this man Caesar Augustus was a force to be reckoned with, and this story should begin with him as the subject...but wait, there's another voice I hear...it is God, and He says: ***The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes.*** (Prov. 21:1)
- The subject of this story is not Caesar Augustus. And the next time we are tempted to throw up our hands in disgust or despair over some decision that has just come out of Washington, DC, or Raleigh, we need to be reminded of this. **God used a Roman Emperor to get His people in the place where they needed to be because God had a higher purpose** for Joseph and Mary than just a tax. God had a higher purpose for Joseph the patriarch than just to serve in Potiphar's house. God had a higher purpose for Daniel than just to learn Persian culture and history. God had a higher purpose for Paul than just to be the Pharisee of Pharisees. He sent him packing down a road to Damascus and when he started down that road he thought of himself as the greatest threat to this Jesus-myth in the whole Roman Empire. By the time he got to Damascus, he had become the greatest witness to the Lordship of Jesus that the world would ever see. YOUR purpose is not your job or your schoolwork or your hobbies. God is using all of those for His higher calling in your life,

because your history, just like Joseph and Mary, is HIS story. That's what all of history is: His story. Who is the subject of this story? Don't let the lead sentence fool you. **God is the subject, beloved. Not Caesar.**

2. What is the action of this story?

- The first five verses of this story are really about registration for a tax. Everybody in the empire had to be registered so they could be assessed a tax. Verse 1: "all the world should be registered." Verse 2: "This census first took place..." Verse 3: "So all went to be registered." Verse 4: "Joseph also went up from Galilee" Verse 5: "to be registered with Mary." Again, if I am reading a newspaper story, that's what this story is about. Registration for a tax. And what everybody has to do to be registered. It is a census. That's how we get the demographics that help the US government to know how many people live here, where they live, how many kids they have, what kind of job they have, what kind of schools they go to, and so on and so forth. It is a government census. It determines how many representatives a state is allotted. States that are growing get more representatives, and states that are declining lose representatives. The numbers come from a census that is held every ten years.
- But what is the real action of this story? Simple answer? **Micah 5:2.** God had promised His people a Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Why Bethlehem? **1 Samuel 16:1; Psalm 132:11; Isaiah 11:1. *Prophecy is the mold of history!*** Paul looks at the events that had unfolded in his own lifetime and saw the way history had fallen right into the mold as prophesied: Acts 13:22-23. From David's seed, He would raise up a Savior, and the promise was that the Savior would be born in the same city that David was born in, a simple little backwoods town called Bethlehem.
- **The action of this story is the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem, because God keeps His Word.** Doesn't that give us reason and courage to live the action of our own story each day with great hope?

3. When is the action of the story?

- Luke tells us: when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Isn't that it? That's all we need to know, right? Well, we could argue the exact date of Jesus' birth and there are estimates from as early as 6BC (Jesus was born six years before Christ?), and as late as 4AD (Jesus was born 4 years after Christ?) AD doesn't stand for after death; if it did then the 33 years that Jesus lived would not be part of measured time. BC is before Christ, AD is Anno Domini, in the year of our Lord. So, the action of this story took place somewhere within a 10 year time frame, and we cannot say with certainty when. Or can we? Because the story is really NOT about the tax but about a birth, THE birth, then we can. We know exactly when the birth took place...
- "...the days were completed for her to be delivered." (vs. 6)
Galatians 4:4 ***But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son...*** That's when Jesus was born, when God decided it was time, when it was fully time. God keeps His Word. And like I used to hear my great-grandmother say, though He doesn't always show up when we want Him to, God is never late! I don't know what you are waiting on in your life; we are all waiting on something almost all the time. Hebrews 12:1 tells us to "run with endurance" the race set before us. George Matheson wrote, "We commonly associate patience with lying down. We think of it as the angel that guards the couch of the invalid. Yet there is a patience that I believe to be harder—the patience that can run. To lie down in the time of grief, to be quiet under the stroke of adverse fortune, implies a great strength; but I know of something that implies a strength greater still: it is the power to work under stress; to have a great weight at your heart and still run; to have a deep anguish in your spirit and still perform the daily tasks. It is a Christlike thing! The hardest thing is that most of us are called to exercise our patience, not in the sickbed but in the street." To wait is hard, to do it with "good courage" is harder!

4. Where is the action of this story?

- The whole world! God had Caesar Augustus tax the world because God had a plan to save the world.
- Caesar thought he was making a world-changing decision to have people register for a tax. But he was simply a pawn in the hand of almighty God who was using the Emperor to move Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. That is the locus, that is center stage. Not the Emperor's throne in the palace in Rome, but in a lowly stable, in a manger, in the little town of Bethlehem, the house of bread. God sent His Son, the bread of life, to Bethlehem, the house of bread. Philips Brooks captured the idea when he wrote, "O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie! Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by. Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." And verse 3, "How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is giv'n! So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven. No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in." No ear may hear His coming. I know you have thought about this before, but take a moment to think about it again. Who was present at Jesus' birth in Bethlehem? Were there kings there? Dignitaries? No, just Mary and Joseph with Jesus, a few shepherds, and possibly some animals. It was Thomas Merton who said, "the ox and donkey knew more of Jesus' birth than Herod himself."
- That leads to the final question and the most important answer of all.

5. Why does this action take place?

- We know because we have read it and heard it and sung about it many times. Luke tells us in the first chapter what is going on here and why. Mary gave birth to the Messiah. Matthew's gospel records the visitation Joseph got from an angel: ***Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you***

shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins. (Matthew 1:20-21). Why does this action take place? This is what is most important and most often missed. God raised up an Emperor who would declare a census that demanded a journey for thousands, perhaps millions. Included in that number of travelers was a simple carpenter and his betrothed wife. He was of the tribe of Judah, of the line of David, so he went to Bethlehem. While he was there his wife, who was already great with child, gave birth to a son. She laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. But all of that happened for this simple reason: ***For He will save His people from their sins.***

- In his first advent entry, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about this season being one of waiting, waiting on the Lord, waiting for His return, waiting, waiting, waiting ... What's interesting and profound is the fact that he wrote all this from prison. Not just a prison, but a Nazi concentration camp. Bonhoeffer writes, "When we hear Jesus knocking, our conscience first of all pricks us: Are we rightly prepared? Is our heart capable of becoming God's dwelling place? Thus Advent becomes a time of self-examination. 'Put the desires of your heart in order, O human beings!' It is very remarkable that we face the thought that God is coming so calmly, whereas previously peoples trembled at the day of God, whereas the world fell into trembling when Jesus Christ walked over the earth. That is why we find it so strange when we see the marks of God in the world so often together with the marks of human suffering, with the marks of the cross on Golgotha." Bonhoeffer rightly connects the incarnation with the crucifixion.
- Bonhoeffer went on, "We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. **We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us.** The coming of God is truly

not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for everyone who has a conscience." God came to lay claim to us!

- And then, "Only when we have felt the terror of the matter, can we recognize the incomparable kindness. God comes into the very midst of evil and of death, and judges the evil in us and in the world. And by judging us, God cleanses and sanctifies us, comes to us with grace and love. God makes us happy as only children can be happy."
- Paul said, "My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you." (Gal. 4:19) Is your life a Bethlehem for the Son of God? Is He born in you? That's first and most important. Second, is He being formed in you? Are you giving yourself to Christ and seeing Him change the way you live and think and speak, as He is formed in you?
- I close with this challenge from Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "God wants to always be with us, wherever we may be - in our sin, in our suffering and death. We are no longer alone; God is with us. We are no longer homeless; a bit of the eternal home itself has moved unto us. Therefore we adults can rejoice deeply within our hearts under the Christmas tree, perhaps much more than the children are able. We know that God's goodness will once again draw near. We think of all of God's goodness that came our way last year and sense something of this marvelous home. Jesus comes in judgment and grace: "Behold I stand at the door! Open wide the gates!"