

Luke 2:1-7
 Christmas Season
 IM1116

December 10 & 11, 2011 pm
 Christmas Concert

“IN THE DAYS OF CAESAR”

INTRODUCTION: The trials and struggles of our lives can often rob us of perspective – especially at Christmastime.

1. **Facts:** During the Christmas season...
 - a. More people committed to the hospital with emotional issues than any other time of the year...
 - b. More reports of people experiencing loneliness than any other time of the year... (homesickness)
 - c. More suicides than the rest of the year...
 - d. “End of the Year Blues” – another year and nothing has changed.
2. I should also give you the *upside* of Christmas...
 - a. More people became engaged at Christmas than any other time of the year (“*she got a ring for Christmas!*”)
 - b. The season for extended family to get together
 - c. The season for benevolent giving and good deeds
3. **2011** was a very difficult year for us. Perhaps the most challenging one for me as a pastor in my 29 years of ministry.
 - a. Economy and budget strains; unemployment/jobs
 - b. More funerals than usual
 - c. “The Year of Cancer” – inordinate amount
 - d. A year for troubled children, aging parents, strained marriages
 - e. Lots of things in our American society that were unsettling
4. *So...I wanted to stop and give you some **hope and encouragement** in the Christmas of 2011.*
5. I ask you tonight to turn to the Christmas/Nativity Story in Luke 2....

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:1-7)

6. Just a short devotional focusing on the one character of the Christmas Story we never mention: **Caesar Augustus**.
 - a. *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. (Luke 2:1)*
 - b. The man who put in motion the events that would lead to the Christmas Story.

I. THE WORLD OF CAESAR AND JESUS

1. **Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus** (*Octavian*) (63 BC – 14 AD)

- a. Great nephew of **Julius Caesar**
- b. Adopted as Julius Caesar's heir in Caesar's will
- c. Octavian became aware of this at age 19
- d. Became commander of an army and defeated his rival **Mark Antony**
- e. Three men became the *Second Triumvirate* ruling the Roman Empire
 - i. *Octavian* in the West
 - ii. *Mark Antony* in the East
 - iii. *Lepidus* in Africa
- f. Mark Antony married **Octavia**, Augustus' sister. But soon left her for **Cleopatra**.
- g. Octavian, in 42 BC, defeated **Brutus and Cassius**; and in 36 BC, he crushed the army of **Pompey**
- h. In 31 BC, Octavian's forces defeated Antony and Cleopatra at the battle of *Actium*.
- i. In 27 BC, the Senate of Rome voted to make Octavian *Caesar Augustus* (the revered one) *Princeps of Rome, Pontiflex Maximus*, and the first Emperor in Roman History.

2. He proved to be Rome's greatest ruler: *Augustus* (the Revered One)

- a. Ended 100 years of civil war and ushered in the *Pax Augusta*
- b. Maintained honest government and a strong military
- c. Established a strong currency and free trade among the provinces of Rome
- d. Developed a solid postal system, built safe roads, ridded the Mediterranean Sea of pirates, improved harbors and built new colonies
- e. Constructed the *Via Roma*: a system of stone-paved roads criss-crossing his Empire (the *Via Appia* carries traffic to this day)
- f. After his death, the Romans worshipped him as a god: *The Divine Augustus*.
- g. **Anthony Everett**: *Augustus: The Life of Rome's First Emperor*; p. ix.

Imperator Caesar Augustus, to give him his proper title, was one of the most influential men in history. As Rome's first emperor, he transformed the chaotic Roman Republic into an orderly imperial autocracy. His consolidation of the Roman Empire two thousand years ago laid the foundations on which Europe both as a region and as a culture was subsequently built. If anyone qualifies as the founding father of western civilization, it is Augustus.

3. He was also a deeply religious man...

- a. **Paul L. Maier:** *The First Christmas: The True and Unfamiliar Story*; pp. 16-18.

Had he not been emperor, Caesar Augustus might well have gone down in history as a religious reformer, for he tried to revive the drooping interest in Rome's state religion. By his day, the average Roman had abandoned his beliefs in the gods of Greco-Roman mythology and philosophical skepticism was growing, while the more credulous joined the foreign mystery cults that had invaded the Empire. Augustus, however, felt that this neglect of the gods was demoralizing Roman society, and that only a restoration of the old republican piety would preserve her greatness. So he set about his religious revival with enthusiasm. He fairly rained temples and shrines down on the Empire, restoring eighty-two temples in the city of Rome alone. He became pontifex maximus ("highest priest") in the state cult, and tried to spark a moral renewal in society.

- b. He became *Pontifex Maximus* (Chief Priest) as well as Emperor.

4. In the days of Caesar Augustus, Roman society was in trouble: It was morally bankrupt and socially in jeopardy.
- a. Fewer and fewer Romans were marrying: "*the tedium of marriage*"
 - b. Fewer and fewer children were being born; abortions were on the rise; divorce was rampant; and illegitimate children numbered more than legitimate children.
 - c. Caesar Augustus became distraught over "*all the men of Rome who prefer to remain boys*" and not marry.
 - d. One day, he asked a group of men to divide themselves in the Forum, between married men and bachelors.
 - i. When the bachelors outnumbered the married men...
 - ii. Caesar went "ballistic." Here's what he said...
 - iii. **Paul Maier:** *The First Christmas*; p. 18.

What shall I call you? Men? But you aren't fulfilling the duties of men. Citizens? But for all your efforts, the city is perishing. Romans? But you are in the process of blotting out this name altogether!...What humanity would be left if all the rest of mankind should do what you are doing?... You are committing murder in not fathering in the first place those who ought to be your descendants!
 - e. Augustus instituted laws to curb adultery, prostitution, fornication and sex outside of marriage.
 - f. The "Lost Boys of Rome" countered by "marrying" little girls, just for the record.
 - g. Caesar counter-acted: He legislated new statutes
 - i. Minimum age for female to marry: 10 years old
 - ii. Longest period of engagement: 2 years
 - iii. Promiscuity was a crime
 - iv. Bachelors could not inherit the family wealth
 - v. Political and tax advantages to married men who fathered and cared for 3 children

- h. And...to ensure that he was being successful, He ordered a **census throughout his empire!**

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- i. His census showed a dramatic increase in population. Why? No one knows. But it certainly was not due to Caesar's moral legislation.
- i. Census of 28 BC: 4,063,000 male Roman citizens
 - ii. Census of 8 BC: 4,233,000 male Roman citizens
 - iii. Census of 14 AD: 4,937,000 male Roman citizens
 - iv. Total subjects in the Roman Empire? *55 million people*
- j. It was the second census of 8 BC that caused Joseph and Mary to move to Bethlehem and give birth to a son – *a subject of Caesar Augustus!*

5. Caesar Augustus also had problems in his empire...

- a. Taxation continued to rise along with unemployment.
- b. His armies were defeated by the Teutonic Tribes of Germany, and the Empire shrank in territorial size.
- c. Parthian terrorists plagued the Eastern Empire (Persia/Iran & Iraq).
- d. The rich got wealthier, and the poor became poorer.
- e. Secularism increased as did sexual depravity.
- f. Irony of ironies: *Augustus died at the age of 77 with no male heir! He had no son!*
- g. He was succeeded by **Tiberius**, his stepson who hated him.
- h. Jesus Christ was 18-19 at the time.

II. THE WORLD OF YOU AND ME

1. **What I want you to see is this:** *The world in which we live is very, very similar to the world of Caesar Augustus and Jesus of Nazareth...*
- a. A world relatively at peace but full of terrorism
 - b. A world of growing commerce but troubled economies
 - c. A world of higher taxes and higher unemployment
 - d. A world with more and more billionaires, a shrinking middle class, and growing number of poor
 - e. A world of sexual perversion, troubled families, vanishing marriage
 - f. A world of lost boys, frustrated females, troubled leaders

- g. A world with an exploding population and lost souls
2. It was into this world that Jesus came –
 - a. A poor child of a poor family of an oppressed people
 - b. A member of a folk religion in a world of growing godlessness
 - c. A subject of Caesar but never a citizen of Rome
 - d. A bachelor without a wife or a child
 - e. *A man on a mission to save the whole world including Rome!*
 3. All that Caesar hoped to be and desired to accomplish, the little boy of Bethlehem has done...
 - a. He is the true *Augustus*: the Revered Ruler of the World – worshipped by billions
 - b. He is the only *Pontiflex Maximus*: Chief Priest
 - c. His Empire spreads from sea to sea; sunrise to sunset, and numbers 1 billion people: *one out of every 6 people in the world...and growing in leaps and bounds.*
 - d. He changes men and women, makes them both holy and moral, and gives them *Covenant Children*.
 - e. He alone is the *Divine Ruler* worthy of the worship of mankind.
 4. His Kingdom is an everlasting kingdom of peace, justice and righteousness.

*For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this. (Isa. 9:6-7)*

*There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.
And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide disputes by what his ears hear,
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;*

*and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist,
and faithfulness the belt of his loins.*

*The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together;
and a little child shall lead them.*

*The cow and the bear shall graze;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.*

*The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra,
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.*

*They shall not hurt or destroy
in all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea. (Isa. 11:1-9)*

*The LORD says to my Lord:
"Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your footstool."*

*The LORD sends forth from Zion
your mighty scepter.
Rule in the midst of your enemies!
Your people will offer themselves freely
on the day of your power,
in holy garments;
from the womb of the morning,
the dew of your youth will be yours.*

*The LORD has sworn
and will not change his mind,
"You are a priest forever
after the order of Melchizedek."*

*The Lord is at your right hand;
he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath.
He will execute judgment among the nations,
filling them with corpses;
he will shatter chiefs
over the wide earth.*

*He will drink from the brook by the way;
therefore he will lift up his head. (Psalm 110:1-7)*

5. **Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus Augustus** never knew who Jesus Christ was. But now, slowly but surely, all the world is learning who Christ is, while fewer and fewer men have even heard of Caesar Augustus.

6. He is, for most people, a footnote in the story of Christ's birth...

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.
(Luke 2:1)

7. In fact, we date the years of our lives with *A.D. (Anno Domini)* – the year of our Lord. We reckon times with reference to the birth of Christ and not according to the founding of Rome!

CONCLUSION: I cannot promise you that 2012 will be any better for us than 2011 was...

1. Or that life will get easier for us in days to come.
2. **President Barak Obama** will worry over the same things Caesar Augustus did. And his laws will not accomplish much more than Octavian's did.
3. But I can promise you this: *Christ is building a kingdom that cannot fail and will not falter. He is slowly but surely conquering Caesar's world – one soul at a time. And He is taking His own census to bless the people of His kingdom.*

*On the holy mount stands the city he founded;
the LORD loves the gates of Zion
more than all the dwelling places of Jacob.
Glorious things of you are spoken,
O city of God.*

*Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon;
behold, Philistia and Tyre, with Cush—
"This one was born there," they say.
And of Zion it shall be said,
"This one and that one were born in her";
for the Most High himself will establish her.
The LORD records as he registers the peoples,
"This one was born there."
Singers and dancers alike say,
"All my springs are in you." (Psalm 87:1-7)*

4. And the message – *The Decree* – from King Jesus is the offer of eternal life for those who will follow Him.

*And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,
"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" (Luke 2:10-14)*

5. We can survive and even spiritually thrive in Caesar's broken world because the Kingdom of God is at hand, and we are invited into it.

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:15)

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Col. 1:13-14)

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." (Revelation 11:15)

6. **William Harold Neidlinger:** *The Birthday of a King*

In the little village of Bethlehem, there lay a Child one day, and the sky was bright with a holy light o'er the place where Jesus lay. Alleluia! O how the angels sang. Alleluia! How it rang! And the sky was bright with a holy light, 'twas the birthday of a King. (Hymn 162)