

“One Birth, One Lord”

Luke 2:1-20

A commonplace birth?

And so, the young couple—a carpenter and his pregnant fiancé—made their way southward from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem, a small village five miles from Jerusalem. There would be no welcoming delegation, no trumpets, no parades. Instead, they would try to get comfortable in a room where animals were sometimes kept. There, Mary, probably only fourteen or so, would give birth. Nothing was out of the ordinary. Mary would have done what all ancient Palestinian mothers did. She would have cut the umbilical cord, tied it off, and tightly wrapped the newborn in strips of cloth to keep him warm and to help him grow straight. Later, Mary would be visited by some shepherds bearing a most fantastical tale.

In those days, shepherds were only a step above slaves on the social ladder. Yet, they told Mary and her husband that angels had sent them to find a newborn in a feeding trough. But the angels also told the shepherds something much more remarkable. The astonished shepherds told Mary that the angels had been the Lord God’s messengers, bearing the Good News, that at long last Israel’s Savior and Messiah, the Lord, had been born – and this Lord was Mary’s baby.

Pax Romana or Pax Christi?

Preachers will often use Luke’s story of Jesus’ birth to contrast the humbleness of his birth, this King of Kings, with the priorities and assumptions of our world. For example, everyone in Luke’s story is poor and powerless. There are no wise men or expensive gifts, only peasants and shepherds. The important and influential of ancient Palestine are absent. All this is in keeping with Luke’s larger portrait of Jesus, for Luke has more to say about the dangers of wealth than do any of the other Gospel writers. Yet, I wonder if we really get it, if we really grasp the gauntlet that is thrown down at the feet of the powerful by the birth of Jesus.

Jesus was born in about 6BC.¹ For more than two decades, Augustus, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, had ruled the empire he created. In the eastern end of the empire, he was even beginning to be worshipped as a god. Under Augustus, the



No Room at the Inn

When I was young, I pictured Joseph and Mary getting turned away from hotel after hotel until finally they collapsed of fatigue in someone’s barn. But this is not the case.

Bethlehem was a tiny place at the time of Jesus’ birth, probably too small to have any sort of public inn. Nor did the young couple probably have to find a cave to stay in. Most likely, they were taken in by one of the peasant families in Bethlehem, for all Jews were expected to take in travelers.

Most peasant homes consisted of a single large room, often with the sleeping quarters on a raised platform so that animals (the most important possessions) could be brought into house. Mary and Joseph probably had to make do with the animals’ area, hence the presence of the manger (a feeding trough). Note, Luke never mentions the presence of animals though that may be simply because they were commonplace.

¹ The makers of the calendar we use miscalculated the year of Jesus’ birth. We know that Herod the Great died in 4BC. Since he ordered the killing of all Bethlehem children younger than two in an attempt to kill Jesus, than Jesus must have been born prior to 4BC.

Savior, Messiah, and Lord

God's angels announce Jesus' birth using three titles for the infant (v. 11).

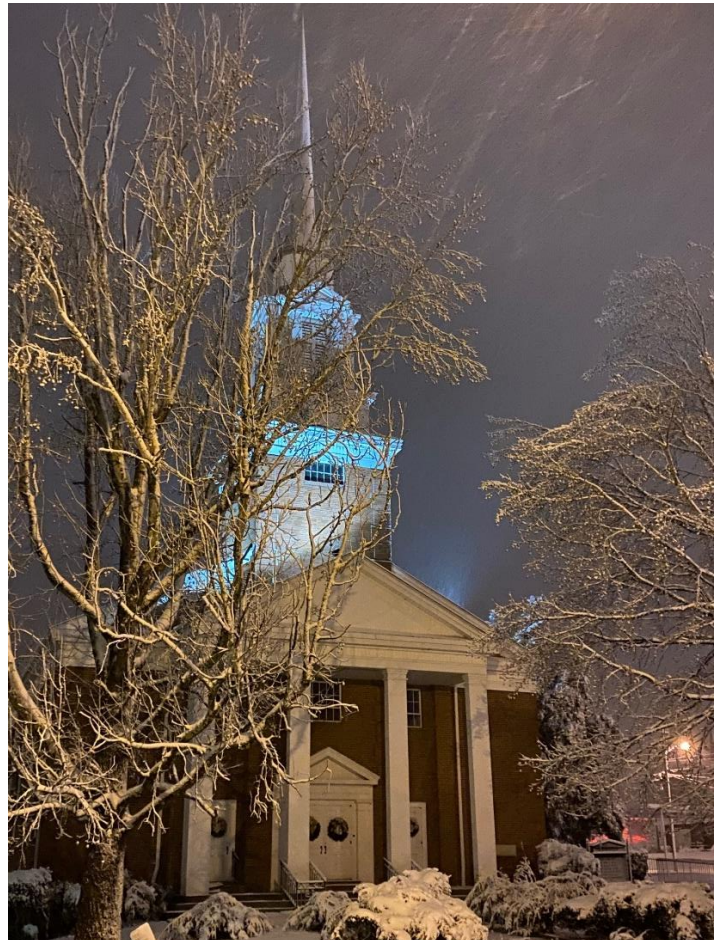
Savior—God had once saved Israel from slavery in Egypt and the Jews waited fervently for a savior who would deliver them from the hated Romans. The Advent carol, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" captures well this cry for freedom, for salvation. Luke's Gospel is written so that we understand that Jesus is not only the Savior of Israel, but of the entire world.

Messiah—This title is simply the English form of the Hebrew *mashia*, meaning "anointed one." Kings and prophets of Israel were anointed. The people awaited the arrival of an "anointed one" from King David's family who would usher in God's kingdom. *Christos*, from which we get "Christ," is simply the Greek word for "anointed one."

Lord—Earlier in his Gospel, Luke prepared us for "Savior" and "Messiah," but not for "Lord." God is the Lord! Jews used "Lord" as a substitute for God's name whenever they read Scripture. What could it mean to apply this title to Jesus? Peter makes this clear at Pentecost. We are to call upon Jesus as Lord for salvation from sin and death (Acts 2:14-41).

empire enjoyed the *Pax Romana*.² To end one hundred years of civil war, Romans had grabbed onto the peace offered by Augustus. But the peace was enforced by the brutal dictatorship of Augustus, his representatives, and his legions.³ So far as the Romans were concerned, there could be only one Lord, and that was Augustus!

But God's herald angels brought news of a vastly different peace: Glory to God! Peace on earth! This would not be a peace brought with the edge of a sword but with the birth of a child. The infant lying in the animals' manger is Savior, Messiah, and Lord. The peace the angels proclaim, the *Pax Christi*, is more than a feeling of rest. It is more than goodwill with our neighbors. This peace is the long-awaited salvation that has now come to earth. This peace, this shalom, is the wholeness and well-being of restored persons and a renewed creation. The *Pax Christi* could not coexist with the *Pax Romana* then and it cannot now. The world cannot be divided up into that which is God's and that which is Caesar's. Jesus' challenge to the earthly powers is as direct now as it was then. After all, what is not God's?! There is and can be only one Lord.



² In Rome, there was an altar to *Pax Augusta*, the peace of Augustus

³ For example, when Jesus was about ten or so, the Romans executed thousands of Galilean Jews to put down a revolt. One can only imagine the effect such brutality had upon the young Galilean boy