

CHRISTMAS DAY, 2009

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Message

I. What on earth was Caesar Augustus thinking? Why not just let everyone register wherever they happened to be living at the time? After all, it's a lot easier to move the paperwork than to move the people. And although the primary purpose of Caesar's first census was likely to raise money for the Roman Empire, we have to wonder if Caesar's census somehow came out of an imperial ego to demonstrate what power and authority the Roman Emperor really had.

Joseph might have been frustrated with Ceasar, too. There he was, forced to close up his carpentry shop, pack up provisions and bring along his nine month pregnant wife on a dangerous and exhausting journey. Joseph and Mary set out over the dusty, rocky roads of Galilee, toward Bethlehem, the town of David, their ancestor of many years ago. It was about 60 miles as the crow flies, but the mother-to-be didn't have it that easy. Up and down the rugged hills they went, no doubt joggling on the back of a donkey, following the contour of the land, their journey was probably closer to 80 or 90 miles, five, six, maybe even seven days. As many of us know, spending time together in close quarters can be a great way to learn more about another person. Anyone who's driven cross country with a car full of kids or ridden a bus on a long trip knows this all too well. This journey for Joseph and Mary would certainly have given the couple a chance to talk. It was probably the longest stretch of time they'd ever spent together alone. Did they use the time to share their thoughts and concerns about Mary's unborn baby, the child neither one of them had planned for? They drew closer to Bethlehem and to Mary's delivery. I wonder, did they have the knowledge of the Bible to recall Micah's prophecy of the ruler of Israel being born in Bethlehem? I wonder did they consider God's role in leading Ceasar to make a decree that would send them to Bethlehem just at the right time for this divinely conceived child to be born? We often hear the prophecy of Micah 5: 2 at Christmas time, **'But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for Me One who will be Ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times'**, because in Matthew's Gospel, Herod's advisors quote Micah to him when the Wise Men visit. Micah's prophecy informs Herod of where to seek the newborn King whom Herod wants to kill out of jealousy. But that's getting ahead of the story. If Mary and Joseph did know and remember that prophecy concerning Bethlehem, did they also remember what follows in verse 3? **'Therefore Israel shall be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of His brothers shall return to the people of Israel'**. We don't know if Mary and Joseph remembered these prophecies of Micah. But, what we do know is that those words of Micah's prophecy, God's Word, provide us with great confidence and hope: the Savior was coming and would be

born in the little town of Bethlehem and those who are His brothers through faith will be gathered together as one family – God’s Holy Christian Church, us, gathered here this Christmas Day are the fulfillment of Micah’s prophecy. But, once again that’s getting way ahead of the story, also. There’s just so much to say about Jesus’ birth. Finally Mary and Joseph reach Bethlehem, overflowing with people, each one seeking his or her own needs and wants. Not unlike our crowded stores and shopping malls in recent days, where many try to fill that gaping hole in their lives and souls with the things of this world instead of with the things of God. But there, in royal David’s town, Bethlehem, in a lowly cattle shed, among lesser creatures of God’s creation - animals, in a minor corner of Ceasar Augustus’s great Roman Empire Micah’s prophecy began to unfold in human history which will eventually include each us. God’s eternal Word became flesh and blood, squawking, needy, bloody, slimy, needing to be diapered in swaddling clothes, needing to be nursed at His mother’s breast, God incarnate, Jesus. Immanuel = God with us! And another decree goes out, not from Emperor to Governor to Roman bureaucrat, but a decree goes out from Almighty God to His angels, to be carried to those considered by the world of their day to be the least of God’s children = shepherds, undesirables, lowly, coarse, outcasts. Not the sort of people you’d invite to a party this holiday season or to any respectable gathering for that matter. And certainly not the sort to be invited into the presence of a Caesar, but our God is different. Our God of heaven, by the decree of His grace, invites the common carpenter Joseph, his pregnant wife Mary and undesirable shepherds. Our God of heaven by the decree of His grace invites the poor, the tired, the frustrated, the rag tag, the despised, and the sinner. God is inviting you and me right now. Simply come through faith. And that is what I want to talk to you about a little bit this Christmas Day.

GOD’S DIFFERENT SORT OF DECREE INVITING YOU AND ME!

II. Caesar’s census decree carried the threat of punishment over the people of the Roman Empire, a great fear of the power of the state. God’s Christmas decree of grace is the complete opposite. It begins by saying, **‘Fear not’**. Caesar’s decree was that people must do something, you must obey. God’s Christmas decree is so different. Saying, **‘I bring you’**, it’s God’s gift of grace. Caesar’s decree demanded that taxes be given him from all the people to pay. God’s Christmas decree is totally different. It gives **‘good news of great joy ... for all the people ... a Savior is born’!** Caesar’s decree came with it’s legions of warriors, clad in their bright red capes and their shiny polished armor and with the terrifying reality they could wage war on a scale not seen before if you did not obey the Caesar of Rome. God’s Christmas decree certainly was given with an army, a host but of angels cloaked in the brilliance of God’s grace **‘praising God’**. The Roman Senate had declared this particular Caesar to be Augustus =

‘the exalted one’, but the royal courts of heaven’s angels declared **‘Glory to God in the highest’**. Notice the HUGE difference between Caesar’s decree and God’s. Unlike Caesar’s decree = ‘you must’, ‘obey’, ‘do, do, do’ – imperative, command. God’s decree is Gospel invitation, a certainty of grace **‘you will find a baby’**, a baby of all things. And they certainly did. They found by God’s grace and invitation the One of whom Isaiah wrote, **‘To us a Child is born, to us a Son is given’**. They found by God’s grace and invitation the One of whom Paul wrote **‘When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, Whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that having been justified by His grace we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life’**.

III. Today, as it was then, God’s decree of salvation in Jesus is still good news of great joy. It is still God’s invitation of grace. A Savior has been born to you and He is Christ the Lord, our Lord. Not a Lord by the decree of Augustus Ceasar’s law, but the Lord of our hearts and souls and lives by the decree of God’s Gospel = God loves you, God has saved you from sin, death and hell, you are justified = declared just if I’d never sinned in God’s sight for Jesus’ sake! The Word of the Lord made believers out of those shepherds not by force but by invitation of grace. That same Word of the Lord made flesh in Jesus Christ has made believers out of us, also, not by force, not by the Law but by invitation of grace. God’s invitation is what we hear as God’s decree of grace: in the water and Word of Holy Baptism, in the decree of the Absolution = all our sins are absolutely forgiven, in the decree of God’s Word spoken, read, sung, preached and taught, and in the decree of His very body and blood of Holy Communion given to you for the forgiveness of your sins. What the shepherds experienced on that first glorious Christmas, even what we experience in our worship and Sacraments, give us only a brief, a masked glimpse of the glory of God which Jesus has prepared for us. When through the gateway of death we join the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven = our loved ones who’ve gone before us, we will be singing not to a tiny newborn in a manger but singing to the crucified, risen and ascended eternal Son of God. As He by grace welcomes and invites us into heaven.

Conclusion: God’s decree of grace is so different from Ceasar’s decree of law. I wonder if Joseph and Mary going to Bethlehem knew or remembered Micah’s prophecy which was being fulfilled through them and us today. I also wonder if the shepherds realized they were going to Bethlehem to see one of their own, the Good Shepherd - this new born Shepherd who was going to lay down His life for His sheep. This Good Shepherd who would call each of His lambs by name and they would know His voice. This Good Shepherd who would battle and defeat that prowling, roaring lion who is continually seeking

someone to devour. Continuing to fulfill Micah's prophecy vs. 4&5, **'He shall stand and shepherd His flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord His God. And they shall dwell secure, for now He shall be great to the ends of the earth. And He shall be their peace'**. We don't know if Mary and Joseph or the shepherds remembered Micah's prophecy. And we don't know what on earth Caesar Augustus was thinking when he made his law decree of census and taxation which disrupted so many people's lives such as Joseph and Mary. But, we do know what the God of heaven and earth was thinking when He made His decree of grace inviting Joseph and Mary and the shepherds to the birth of this world's Shepherd Savior. It's the same decree of gracious invitation we know God is making to us today. Simply come through faith, not under threat of Law, but by invitation of grace = God loves you for Jesus sake! Amen