

# Sermon Text for December 18, 2022

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## *Micah 5:2-5a, Luke 2:1-7* *“When Christmas”*

What year do we commonly say that Jesus was born? This should be a pretty simply question and answer period to start our Sunday off. Right, the year 0, that is why we have BC which is Before Christ and AD which is Anno Domini which means in English the year of our Lord, or the year of the birth of our Lord. Now we have BCE which is before common Era and CE which is Common era, but for the most part we all grew up with BC and AD and we all pretty much assumed that the year 0 was the year that Jesus was born, the first Christmas took place when? Year 0. So for the When Christmas question it is a wrap, year 0.

We have seen so far What Christmas – and we talked about Emmanuel, God with us, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. This is the What Christmas. The Why Christmas we saw was sin, our sin, that separates us from God and without a personal relationship with Jesus we do not don’t benefit from the what. Why Christmas is because we have sinned God loved us so much that even while we were yet sinners he was born, died and rose again for us. Last week in the who Christmas we saw Jesus the person, who was born like one of us, went through the messiness of life without shielding himself from the most difficult of circumstances and the most dysfunctional of families with a genealogy that is messy, a birth that is messy as he is born to a single teen mom, and then a life where he did not hesitate to touch the leprous and the outcast. What – Emmanuel, Why – our sin, Who – Jesus in a messy world. Today When.

The when is actually a historical problem as there is not a clear scholarly understanding to the year in which Jesus was born. But as I say that statement there is a question as to what significance would a historical problem have on our faith. As I heard this week from a member of this church: we can’t think our way to faith but we certainly can think our way out of it. But if we understand that God is at work in 4 BC as much as he is at work now then we can understand that God is able to use the people who were in power then as much as he can now to carry out His purposes.

As a result what we see in history as a failure or as something that can clearly be identified as not being a part of God’s will, can be, and certainly has been used by God to carry out His purposes. But we don’t see it when it happens, much like when Jesus was born nobody understood how God was using the powerful and the not so powerful to bring about His purposes. Let’s read.

## READ

When we look at our Scripture in Micah and also Luke we quickly realize that the question of When has to be paired with the question where as well, especially in relationship to our first Scripture which we find in Micah 5. Micah lays out for us clearly the location of where this Messiah will be born. Remember this Messiah, this one that was told to us in Isaiah 7, this Emmanuel that would be born to a virgin. This anticipation for the Messiah was built up and there were clues given as to where he was born, and this Scripture is one of the primary clues and it points directly to Bethlehem. Notice the town Ephrathah, now you know where that comes from, from the Bible, it means fruitful.

These verses in Micah are clearly picked up by the political leader of the region, not of the world like Caesar, but of the region in Herod in Matthew 2 where when he is confronted by the wise men looking for the newborn king he tells his own scholars to look it up and they find Micah chapter 5 which points to Bethlehem as the Where of the birth of the Messiah. There is clearly no controversy in Scripture as to the where in Scripture because it is so clearly laid out in Matthew and Luke and even before that in Micah. It was really the only place where the Messiah could be born.

There are other Scriptures which contribute to the Christmas story other than just the where. We find in Isaiah 1:3 the ox knows its owner and the donkey its master's crib. Do you see the manger scene with the ox and the donkey, this is from where it comes. Or Jeremiah 14:8 which states: O hope of Israel, its savior in time of trouble, why should you be like a stranger in the land, like a traveler turning aside for the night? That takes us to the Christmas story of Joseph and Mary looking for lodging in the night.

So if we were to talk about where Jesus was born, that is solidified, Bethlehem, even though his family is from Nazareth, in a stall, placed in a manger, all of that checks out. So the prophet Micah could easily have said to Luke hundreds of years later, see, I told you so, Jesus the Messiah, the Savior, would be born in Bethlehem. But once we get to Luke, and it is here where the When controversy starts, what we find are historical anomalies which can easily distract us from the main point of Luke's message for his Christmas story. When Christmas for Luke is much less important than the actors at play in the historical time period in which he was writing.

Let's look at vs. where we read about Caesar August whom we know ruled from 31 BC to 14 AD so that checks out. He is the Emperor of all of the known world when Jesus is born. He is that Roman Emperor who instilled what is called today the Pax Romana, or the Roman

peace and so his reign was marked by an incredible expansion of borders and a stability never seen before and never seen after his reign. It is no surprise that we read about the Prince of Peace and Jesus being given this attribute because that was the time in which they were living. Things were good when Jesus was born, very good for the population and for the nation.

During his reign it was not unusual for a census to be taken. Some historians can point to a census taken every 14 years of his reign, so in a 44 year reign that would be about 4 censuses taken. There were also censuses taken at a more local level, rather than a national one. You know how the school board sends out the census every year, there definitely would have been those kinds taken as well. But what you may not know is that every time a census was taken it was another opportunity for unrest and dissatisfaction to rear its ugly head.

A census was taken primarily for the purpose of increasing taxes among the population. So the people knew that when a census was taking place they could almost be assured that their taxes would increase. Either for taxes or for military service, if a census was being taken it was so that the emperor could know how many men he had to fight the battle he was about to wage. Neither of these is very popular among the people. But for Jesus' people it was especially unpopular because religiously it was against the Jewish law for the people of Israel to be counted but since they were under the rule of the Romans, they were forced to do it every time that a census was taken.

We read in II Samuel 24 how David displeased God because he takes a census and God strikes David and the Israelites with leprosy as a result. So when we read about a census in vs.1 we can't ignore some of these cultural realities that were a part of the fabric and the reality of that first Christmas. In vs.2 we read about Quirinius who was governing that region, and he would have been appointed by Caesar and it was a census during his reign. Historically we know of a Quirinius that governed in that region of the World, the historical Josephus talks about him, and he reigned briefly, only for one year in 6AD. We also read about him taking up a census. So, we see Caesar checks out and Quirinius checks out and if we were only in Luke we would be good. We could easily say, okay, this happened in 6AD so that is when Jesus was born. End of story.

But Matthew tells a different story. He talks about Herod who would have been put in place by Caesar to oversee the Jewish population. We know that Herod died in 4 BC so the stories in Matthew of the wise men and then Herod killing all the 2 and under year olds in Bethlehem would have happened around that time period. So, we can safely say that Jesus was

born between 4BC and 6AD but it is clear that Herod was not alive when Quirinius had his census. I hope that doesn't bother you too much.

If I were to tell you that the Spanish Flu took place during WWI it is true, but that is a 6 year range when it could have happened. Luke knew about Herod and he knew about the very many censuses that took place so for me there is no problem in him speaking in generalities in defining the when Christmas. I personally believe he was born in 6 AD, but it doesn't impact my faith one way or the other. But some people get so caught up in this detail that they miss the main point of the story of the When Christmas.

The census is used by Luke to move the holy family from Nazareth to Bethlehem which is where the Messiah had to be born. The when this took place impacted God's kingdom because we see God using Emperors, regional rulers, shepherds, animals, inn keepers, all for God's purposes without any of them aware in the least bit that they were a part of God's plans in the midst of these events.

We see in Scripture how God is willing to use even pagan world leaders to carry out his purposes. Look at Isaiah 45:1 where we read that Cyrus, who was the king of Persia, so a heathen nation that liberated the Israelites from Babylon and was used for God's purposes. But he did not realize how he was being used. This world leader didn't recognize that God was basically using him as a pawn in God's plans.

Luke's basic conviction is that emperors, governments, and laws serve the purpose of God, often without them knowing it and never when they claim it. Caesar Augustus here, like Cyrus in Isaiah, serves as an instrument of God's will. The census that is meted out by him gets the family moving so that the Messiah can be born as God foretold. God does not hesitate to use the emperor as his agent.

This is the point, God is at work in the world and in our lives in ways that we don't understand and we can't imagine. When bad things happen to good people we can say that this isn't the will of God, but we can never know how that will impact God's kingdom for the good. God is at work in our lives all the time from the world leaders to the lowly cattle. This past week was an interesting week for our community, this little town of Strasburg. Restart ministry a drug rehab program was going to buy the elementary school to begin a residential program. They already have a residential program going on up on Lehman road. There was a huge neighborhood outcry against them coming here and at the end of the day they decided to withdraw their proposal to buy the building from the school board.

Honestly they withdrew it because they were not going to be able to come up with the financing in two months, but the way thing played out it certainly looked like they withdrew because of the community uproar. As a result of this going on we were able to make some connections with the director and Our Table on Friday evening hosted all of their residents, 10 of them for a dinner and worship. I don't know if it was God's plan for them to be in our neighborhood or not, but I do know that as a result of those events God has placed us in direct contact with those whom he calls us to minister to and be neighbors to.

That may happen in your life as well. When things happen in certain places or at certain times that seem so out of place, and even tragic at times, who knows for what purpose this event will serve in our own lives. Amen.