

How should we celebrate Christmas as Christians? Because how we answer that question is going to shape how we approach today. Because I'm sure you all have plans to be with family today, to open presents, to enjoy a good meal, all of which are good things. We should do them, because it's good to gather together on Christmas. But I ask you: why do we do them? What makes them good? Because the world would have you believe, Christians, that these things are the only thing that makes Christmas good. That Christmas is about gathering together. Christmas is about being nice to one another. Christmas is about being sentimental. It's a time for holiday cheer, something that everybody can enjoy regardless of what they believe. Of course, it's pretty hard to argue with that. It sounds really nice, doesn't it? It's nice to be nice. It's nice to be together, and so forth. But if that's all that Christmas is, then why are we here this morning? I'm not talking about those who can't be here this morning, but why are we here this morning? Why not just stay home, be with family, open presents? Why come here to church at all today? And sadly, there are some who think that way. Even some Christian churches who would think that way. There are churches across this nation which canceled Christmas Day services long ago, because they wanted it to be a time for family and presents and so forth. They had totally bought into what the world says Christmas is. But we gather here today, Christians, and we do everything today because Christmas is not only for family and presents and food. All of these things that we do, we do them because of what God has first done for us.

To show us why we are here today, Luke in our Gospel reading points us back to history, points us back to what happened long ago. Which, of course, might sound a little bit odd to us. We don't normally associate Christmas with a history lesson. When was the last time you heard a Christmas carol that was a bunch of names and dates? You just don't hear it. But Luke does this in order to show us that celebrating Christmas begins with remembering what happened in the past. So he begins, verse 1 of our reading: "In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered." So we celebrate Christmas, first of all, by remembering what the first Roman Emperor did. Caesar Augustus, or Gaius Octavius as he's also known. He wanted to tax his empire. But in order to do that, he needed to know how many people were actually in it. And so he called for a census so that he could tax everyone fairly and appropriately. But of course, he couldn't do that personally. The Roman Empire was simply too big. And so he had to have others carry it out for him. That's why Luke goes on to say, verse 2: "This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria." Quirinius, or as he is also known Publius Sulpicius Quirinius, was the governor of Syria to the northeast of Judea in that time. And as the governor, Quirinius would make sure that the census was carried out. He would make sure that what Augustus wanted to happen would happen.

Of course, we might say: "Now, hold on a second! What does this have to do with Christmas? Why is Luke talking about Augustus and Quirinius? Why would we talk about these guys who aren't even Christians? How does this help us celebrate Christmas? It seems as odd to us as if we were to sit down for our Christmas dinner and start talking about Napoleon. It just doesn't seem to be relevant. It just don't seem to mean anything. Why does Luke start here?" Because it shows us, Christians, that this is all part of God's plan. Because Augustus gave the decree. Quirinius carried it out. And that caused a poor man in the province of Judea to travel south because of it. The poor man Joseph traveling from Nazareth south to Bethlehem, because he was of the lineage of David. David had been born in Bethlehem all those centuries ago, so he had to go back home in accordance with the law. Joseph didn't have a choice in the matter. He had to go. But he took along with him his heavily pregnant betrothed Mary. And she had to go with him too even

though she was just about to give birth because of the law. But while they were there in Bethlehem, she gave birth to her firstborn son, and they laid him in a manger, because there was nowhere else to put him. And none of this was an accident. All of it happened just as God intended it to happen. God caused all of these things to come about so that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem on that exact day.

Because Augustus didn't give the decree by accident, Christians. It's not like Augustus thought it up in his mind and said that's a good idea, and it just so happened to work out for good. That it was just a giant coincidence. God put it into his mind to do this. God caused Augustus to call for the census so that everyone would go home. God made Joseph be in Bethlehem at the exact time that Jesus was to be born. All of this was part of his plan. And we know that this was all part of his plan because of the words of the prophets, especially the prophet Micah. Micah says in chapter 5, verse 2: "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days." Micah said that seven hundred years before it happened. Jesus was to be born in Bethlehem, and that was a plan seven centuries in the making. None of this was an accident. God caused it to happen so that the words of the prophet Micah would be fulfilled. God raised up the Roman Empire to be rulers of the whole world. God raised up Augustus to be Caesar. God made Quirinius governor. God made Augustus call for that census. God made Joseph travel to Bethlehem. And all of these things happened so that Jesus would fulfill the prophecy of Micah. Everything happened just as God wanted it to happen.

But maybe it still sounds like coincidence. Maybe we want to say, "Well, so what? What difference does it make? What difference does it make if Jesus was born on that day in that year in that place? God makes everything happen, right? He made Augustus to be Caesar. And it's not like we make anything special out of Augustus. We don't get any special meaning out of him being Caesar. So what makes this different? What makes the birth of Jesus different from anything else?" The angels tell us, verses 10 and 11 of our reading: "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.'" All of this happened, Christians, so that our Savior would be born. Jesus was born on that day in that year in that city to save us from our sins. Jesus was born so that we would be forgiven, so that we would become God's people. Jesus was born to die for us. And all of this was God's plan from eternity. That's why God caused all of these things to happen. He caused these things to happen so that we would no longer be trapped in sin. He caused these things to happen so that we would no longer have to go to hell because of our sin. He caused these things to happen so that we would be set free from our bondage to sin. He caused these things to happen so that we would be forgiven and made new. God did all of these things to save us through his Son. That's why we're here today.

And all of this shapes, then, how we should celebrate Christmas too. Because if Christmas is only about being nice, if Christmas is only about coming together, if Christmas is only about being sentimental, then what do we really have? Family, food, and presents are all good things. We should all hold onto them. But if that's all we have, if that's it, then we don't have any real hope. There's nothing to hold onto. There's no joy for us in the midst of a joyless world. But Christmas is more than these things. Christmas is what God did for us all those years ago. In the days of Augustus and Quirinius, Jesus was born to save us. How can that not give us joy, knowing that Christ our Lord has forgiven us our sins? How can that not give us joy, knowing

that the joy we feel right now in Christmas will one day turn into the joys of heaven, which will never come to an end? Through Christmas, God has given us a future, a future with him eternally. That is why we are here today.

So Christians, let us give thanks to the Lord for his Son. Let us praise him for his rich mercy shown to us in Bethlehem long ago. And as we sit down to eat our Christmas dinner this day, as we gather with family, especially family from far away, as we prepare to open presents, whatever it may be that we do today, let us do all of these things remembering what God has done for us and what God will do for us in his Son, Jesus Christ. And then our Christmas joy will truly never come to an end!

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, in the fullness of time you sent your Son Jesus Christ to be born of the Virgin Mary to save us from our sins. Help us always to turn towards him in true faith, so that together with the angels we may praise him in eternity. In his name we pray. Amen.