

December 16, 2018

It Came Upon a Midnight Clear...

"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee, to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." Luke 2:1-7

Luke, in his gospel account of the life of Jesus, recorded the most complete record of what we might call the Christmas story. As a second generation believer he had obviously spent some time piecing together the story, particularly from Mary, the mother of Jesus. Luke's record of the birth of John the Baptizer, and Mary's song of submission recorded in chapter 1, verses 46-50 clearly indicate at least one of Luke's sources.

Regardless of where and how Luke came by his account of the birth of the Christ, it is clear, I think, that the hand of God is at work to bring about this culmination of centuries of promises and prophecies. In one simple little line Luke tells us so much about what God is doing. ***"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world."***

Cesar Augustus was the first Roman Emperor to openly declare himself to be a god. He intentionally took the title 'Augustus' to let everyone know what he believed himself to be. He seems an unlikely choice to do God's bidding, but he was. He chose at just the right time to hold a census. Regardless of his motivation, God used him to bring Joseph and Mary from their little home town in Galilee all the way south to the little town of Bethlehem in the ninth month of Mary's pregnancy.

It is highly unlikely that they would have chosen to make this journey willingly, but because of Caesar Augustus they had to. And in traveling to Bethlehem, this promised child, born in the line and from the house of David, was delivered not in Nazareth, but in Bethlehem where prophecy had said he would be born.

In our Christmas stories we like to focus on the birth in a stable, with the baby in a manger because there was no room in the inn. But in God's majestic plan this baby born to be ***"King of Kings and Lord of Lords"*** would begin life in the humblest of circumstances. The one who would teach his people to be servants, was born into this life as part of poor family.

"And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ***"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests!"*** Luke 2:8-20

God brings his Son into this world in the poorest of circumstances and he announces that birth to most humble of people in that day. To be a shepherd was to be among the least respected

workers in any community. But it is to these lowly servants that God brings the *"...good news of great joy..."* In response to what they have heard and seen the shepherds rush into Bethlehem and find the baby lying in a manger.

They share their experiences with Mary and Joseph and Luke tells us the Mary *"...treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart..."* The shepherds, having experienced this great event, returned to their flocks, but their story began, no doubt, to be circulated throughout the region

Why does the Christmas story matter? From almost the very beginning of time God has been promising that he would rescue man from the consequences of sin. Over and over again his prophets have pointed to the coming of Emmanuel, God with us. And in this simple and beautiful story God fulfills all of those promises and prophecies. The Christ, the Messiah, has come into the world and he will be our Savior. *"...good news of great joy..."*

