

In This Reality

Luke 2:1-20

The Nativity of Our Lord, Christmas Midnight

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

Our Lord was born when Caesar Augustus was the emperor of the Roman Empire. This Caesar is the first one to assume the name Augustus. His personal name was Octavian. We know his dates from Roman accounts of their own history.

Our Lord was born while Quirinius was governor of Syria. The Romans had divided their empire into provinces. Each province had its own leader. Some provinces had procurators. Some provinces had kings, like Herod. Some provinces had councils. And some provinces like Syria had governors. The titles meant slightly different things depending on the province. When the Romans conquered a new territory they allowed local governments to continue to function as long as such governments submitted to the emperor, paid their taxes, allowed Roman soldiers in their territory as policing agents, and in certain capital cases Roman justice prevailed. Other than that the Romans allowed local autonomy. If you had a king when the Romans conquered you, you were allowed to keep your king as long as he paid his taxes.

Quirinius was governor of Syria. Quirinius had done great service to the Roman emperor by quelling some rebellious people in what we today call Turkey. In order to accomplish this, the emperor gave him military governorship of Syria. We know the dates when he held this governorship and who was handling the civilian affairs in Syria while Quirinius was handling the military affairs of Syria.

Luke is giving the date of our Lord's birth. He is dating our Lord's birth the way that ancients date things, by telling you who was in charge of the country when the Lord was born. The reason that Luke mentions Quirinius is because he also handled the administrative duties of the census that Caesar Augustus had ordered.

Anyone reading Luke in the ancient world would have remembered the census about which he was speaking and would have immediately known the date of our Lord's birth.

Our Lord was born in Bethlehem.

In spite of the fact that our Lord was born in Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph are from Nazareth. After the events of our Lord's birth and early childhood, Mary and Joseph will return to live in Nazareth. When our Lord comes of age and begins His ministry, He comes from Nazareth. Nazareth is His hometown. He is called a Nazarene. Even we refer to Jesus as Jesus of Nazareth. If these were the only parts of the account that we had to go on we might come to the natural conclusion that Jesus was born in Nazareth also, but he wasn't. He was born in Bethlehem.

Joseph and Mary left Nazareth to go to Bethlehem. Caesar Augustus had ordered a census. He wanted to know how many people were in the empire and where they lived. He needed this information for administrative purposes, like any nation on earth does. But the Jews did not consider that they were from the town where they actually lived. They considered that they were from the town of their ancestors. In spite of the fact that Joseph lived, worked, and died in Nazareth, he considered himself to be from Bethlehem. So if Caesar wants to know where he is from then Joseph will go to Bethlehem to register. He will not allow himself to be registered in Nazareth. So he leaves and takes Mary with him.

They go to the province of Judea. The Romans called it Judea because that is where the Jews had their local government, the Sanhedrin, which ruled Judea together with a king, Herod the Great, who had paid Caesar an awful lot of money to be king.

Once they got to Judea, they went to Bethlehem. It is the city of David.

Luke tells you these details so that you know the precise location of our Lord's birth. He was born in Judea. He was born in Bethlehem. Bethlehem is the city of David. Bethlehem is the city where David was born. It is the city from which the royal line of Israel comes. In spite of the fact that David established the capital of Israel at Jerusalem, Bethlehem is the city of his birth. Furthermore the prophets of old had predicted that the final royal heir of David would come from Bethlehem.

Luke is precise in his location so that you know where our Lord was born and so that you know that He fulfills the Scripture.

Then Luke becomes even more precise. There was no room for Mary and Joseph in the guest house. I hate to burst anyone's bubble, but it is unlikely that Bethlehem was big enough to have an inn. Even if Bethlehem did have an inn it is extremely unlikely that Mary and Joseph would have stayed in one. Inns in the Roman Empire were the haunts of unsavory people and the Jews considered them unclean and for good reason. It is more likely that if Joseph is going to Bethlehem to be registered because he was of the house and line of David, that he and Mary found his cousins in Bethlehem and are staying with them. But if all of David's descendants are returning to Bethlehem to be registered, then it is likely that Joseph's cousins are hosting the entire extended family. Ancient Near Eastern homes had three levels generally speaking. They had the main level where the family ate and slept and did what families do in their spare time. They had an upper room where the guests stayed when they came. And they had a lower room where they kept their animals. When Joseph shows up there is no room in the guest room. And just to defend Joseph's relatives it is possible that there were other pregnant women there besides Mary. Joseph's cousins then have no alternative, but to put them in the lower room with the animals where there would have been a manger. While Luke's Gospel does not mention a stable, it is possible that Joseph's relatives had a stable in a cave near Bethlehem and that they put Mary and Joseph there. One need not imagine Joseph running from house to house in Bethlehem looking for a place for Mary after being thrown out of the inn. The reality is much more simple and ordinary. But it gets Jesus in the manger. And that is the point!

Luke is very precise on this point. In fact he mentions the manger about three times. Mary places our Lord in the manger. The angels tell the shepherds that they will find Him in the manger. The shepherds find Him in the manger. And by the way the manger then serves as the identification for the shepherds as to which baby is the right baby. If there were other pregnant women in Bethlehem on the night when our Lord was born, it is possible there are other babies in Bethlehem and others who were also born that night! After all the angel says, "This will be the sign for you, you will find a baby wrapped and lying in a manger." It is the manger that is the key for the shepherds to identify just which baby in Bethlehem is the right baby!

So Jesus is born while Caesar Augustus was emperor and while Quirinius was governor of Syria. He was born in Judea, in Bethlehem, in some kind of animal shelter and placed into a manger after His birth. We have time and we have location.

This is extremely valuable information to us incarnate beings.

We have problem with our thinking nowadays. We think in a fact/value split. We believe that there is a difference between facts and values. We believe that facts are things that are true for everybody. If someone denies a fact, they are either misinformed, stubborn, ignorant, or insane. Values are those things which we think are true only for certain people and not true for everyone.

In our society it is generally agreed that the first president of the United States was George Washington. We believe that to be true for everybody. Anyone who denies it is insane or ignorant or stubborn or whatever.

On the other hand we believe that the statement, "Abortion is murder," is a value. We believe that it is true for some people, but not true for everyone. Some people think abortion is murder and some people do not. And since some people think it is murder and some do not, we think that the statement "Abortion is murder," is a value and not a fact.

Some of you chafe at this and you should chafe at it. A fact has been taken by our western way of thinking and it has been converted into a value as if it is true only for some people and not for everyone.

Most people in our larger society consider our religious beliefs to be value and not facts. For example, one member of the congregation once asserted that the resurrection of our Lord from the dead was a fact. And he was right. It is a fact. The apostles have testified to the fact. But since it is the central fact of our religious devotion, some people say that the resurrection of our Lord is not a fact. They say that it is a value that we have. That means that they think that Jesus did not rise from the dead, but that we are too ignorant and stubborn to admit it.

All kinds of things get divided into facts and values in way that obscures the truth. Our religious doctrines are considered the values of our community. But the sky being blue is a fact. Medical procedures are governed by these so called facts. That is why we have arguments about health care in this country. Nobody can agree what the facts are. The President seems to think that those of us in the religious community are operating on a set of values that should not affect the Affordable Care Act and its implementation because he and others believe that it is implemented based on the facts. And here we sit practically living in two different realities and if you think about things long enough eventually there are no facts. There is just a bunch of people holding to a bunch of values over which they fight and argue and no one can prove anything.

Where this one fact that we can agree on, we must agree on and that is this: there is a hole in the ground that is waiting for you. If not a hole in the ground, then something similar to it. When you die, you will go in. This fact is something that we all agree is bad. Even the people who say that death is a natural part of life fight against their own death with all of their might. No one wants to die. We all agree to the fact of the case that death is not good.

You can try to make the case that some death is good by saying that death releases suffering people from their suffering, but the fact of the matter is, is that if it were not for death, they would not have suffered that way to begin with. Their suffering was what killed them which proves that their suffering and illness was part of their death. Death did not end their suffering. Their suffering culminated in their death. If death were a good thing, there would be a lot more suicides than there are.

Next to your hole in the ground there will be a stone. It will proclaim the date of your death and the date of your birth. With that you are datable and locatable. People can figure out where and when you were born. People can figure out where and when that you die. These are the facts.

If we are going to have a God who is going to combat this thing called death, we need a God who proposes facts, not values. What value is there that will save you from death? You can believe any crazy thing that you like, you are still going to die. There is no value system on this earth that spares anyone from death. No matter how sincerely one holds to one's values or how hard one has fought for them, death still comes and takes them to the hole in the ground that we must all face.

If we are going to have a God who solves the problem of death we must have a God that works in the realm of facts. We must have a God who works in the realm of what really happens and not just in the realm of the things that we would like to be true.

But in order for God to do that He must do more than simply speak to us from the sky. If God only spoke to us from the sky and His words had no creative power, then He would be a God of only

values and opinions. He would be a God who could not alter the facts of our reality. He would be a God who could not solve our problems only fool us into feeling better about them.

If we are to have a God who deals with death, He must deal with the facts. He must deal with the hole in the ground. He must deal with the reality that we face. This God has to be a God who enters into our reality and lives with us. Assuming that He is outside of the reality, He must come down here and live with us in the real world and help us with our real problems especially the ultimate problem, death.

And that is the God that you have. You do not have a God who stays on Mount Olympus and looks down on the creation from on high. You do not have a God of your own values which exists only in your heart and mind and never enters the real word. You do not have a virtual God who counts only for online blogs and does nothing in the real world in which you live.

You have a God who lived and lives in this world. You have a God who overcame the hole in the ground by rising from the dead. You have a God who has promised you your own resurrection and that is not some pie in the sky, deeply held value. That is a fact based on the fact of His own resurrection. You have God who does not forgive sins out of a naively benevolent heart. You have a God who bleeds and dies under His own justice in order to forgive you of everything that you have done.

You have God who lives and acts in history in the same place and time where you live. You have the God who was born in Bethlehem while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.