

Luke 2:1-7

¹In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governing Syria. ³And everyone went to register, each to his own town. ⁴And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the town of Nazareth, into Judea, to the town of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was from the house and family line of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, his wife, who was pledged to him in marriage and was expecting a child. ⁶And so it was that while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son, wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Sermon # 2, Advent Wreath series, Bethlehem candle, December 6, second Sunday of Advent, St. Paul's Green Garden.

Text: Luke 2:1-7

Theme: "God Accomplishes His Purpose through the Town of Bethlehem"

In Christ Jesus, my dear fellow redeemed,

There is a saying in Christian circles that goes something like this: "Man proposes, but God disposes." We can plot and plan and scheme but in the end God will accomplish his holy purpose just the same. Many examples in the Bible bear out this truth.

Remember that it was the avowed purpose of the Pharisee, Saul to exterminate the 1st century Christian Church. But God accomplished his own purpose. He confronted Saul on the road to Damascus, called him to faith in the Lord Jesus and made him one of the most ardent and energetic missionaries in all of church history. Of course, you know him as the apostle Paul.

Our God often accomplishes his purpose among his people by bringing about changes in their lives. After Christ's resurrection and ascension to heaven, the disciples continued to meet behind locked doors because they feared the Jews. But only 10 days after Jesus visibly left the earth, the Holy Spirit came to them and turned them from trembling cowards into bold witnesses of their crucified and risen Savior. God does accomplish his purposes.

Today, we light the second candle of our Advent wreath, the Bethlehem candle. It stands as a symbol of the small town where Jesus was born and through which God accomplished his purpose of bringing his Son into the world. Though Israel's former King, David, had come from Bethlehem no one could truly guess the great things God would do through this small town.

Bethlehem was probably a pretty typical town in the northern part of the region of Judea. But neither its small size nor its insignificance mattered to God. He chose to

accomplish his good purpose through this town by using a heathen emperor. “**1In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.**”

Caesar Augustus, according to secular history, was the first emperor of the Roman empire after years of a republic form of government. “Augustus,” which means “exalted one”, was the title given to this man, Octavius, by a vote of the Roman Senate. He, being a typical Roman, worshiped Roman gods, not one, but many. He apparently had no knowledge of the true God. If he did he certainly did not worship him. For that reason he very proudly accepted the title “Augustus” or ‘Exalted One.” Regardless of how much power, or what purpose Augustus had in mind, God would use him to accomplish his purposes.

During the reign of Augustus, while Quirinius was in charge of the province of Syria, which included Judea and Bethlehem, the emperor gave the order that every person in the Roman empire should be counted. Augustus may have had some idea that the Jews did not appreciate the rule of Rome. So it seems he may have tried to make this census a little more palatable to them by having each Jewish family go back to the town of their ancestral origin.

While we are considering this head count of every person in the Roman empire we should also understand the reason for it. It may have been vain pride, but it was also for the purpose of taxation. Each province could be taxed according to its population. A periodic census would help the emperor keep better track of the population and what the tax levy would be for each province.

The census was a human plan to accomplish human purposes. Nevertheless, God used it to accomplish HIS purposes. 700 years before the Savior was born the Lord told his people through the prophet Micah, “**But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, from you, will go out the one who will be the ruler for me in Israel. His goings forth are from the beginning, from the days of eternity.**” It was God’s will that the Savior be born in the little village of Bethlehem. Yet Mary and Joseph were residents of Nazareth in Galilee, some seventy miles north of Bethlehem. But as we will see they were also connected by their forefathers to the town of Bethlehem. Under the decree of August each family had to return to its hometown for the census. God used a man who did not love him to fulfill a prophecy he had given to his people centuries earlier. He accomplished his purpose through the town of Bethlehem by using the worldly interests of a heathen emperor.

We should not be too ready to limit the power of the Almighty God. He can, if he chooses, display his power in a dramatic way. He can bring his enemies to their knees as he did when he tormented the Egyptians with 10 plagues and forced them to let Israel go free. He can change water into wine and heal the sick with just a word. But even more often his power is evident in a much quieter way as it was when he used a pagan

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emperor's decree to bring the earthly parents of the Savior to the very town he designated as the birthplace of the Savior.

In the early 1990's the world saw some dramatic changes in the attitudes of certain communist governments and their leaders. In the years since then the world has seen how the Almighty God used this change to open countries to the gospel; countries that were once locked behind the 'iron curtain'. God has used the destruction of the Berlin Wall among other historic events so the gospel can penetrate into many of those countries and more importantly into the hearts of people whose souls Jesus has redeemed by his blood. Who knows how many souls are still going to be touched because God fulfilled his purpose to bring the gospel to countries once dominated by atheistic dictators. How many lives do you touch, of people who don't know the Savior? Do not doubt that God can use you also, to bring the good news of the Savior to the life of someone who is now dead without him. He can use you and me, frail vessels that we are, just as he has used many other, uncertain, humble Christians throughout history.

It is God's purpose to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to all people. It is not beneath him to use you and me to accomplish his purposes just as it was not beneath him to use a heathen emperor. And in the very same way he accomplished his purposes by choosing to work through an insignificant family.

If we look at the family genealogies given by Matthew and Luke we find that both Mary and Joseph traced their family trees back to King David. That means each was descended from royalty. This was the reason, as Luke tells us, that they traveled from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea for the census, **"because he was from the house and family line of David."**

By this time, of course, Mary and Joseph were no longer considered royalty. Far from it. Since the time of the Babylonian captivity Israel had been ruled mainly by foreigners. First, Babylon had taken them captive. After seventy years they received some respite when the Medes and Persian conquered Babylon. Finally, in 63 B.C. the Romans brought the Jews under their control. No one in the royal family had occupied David's throne in Jerusalem for centuries. Certainly not Mary or Joseph's family.

Why, they were nothing but humble peasants. Joseph was a carpenter and we aren't even told what Mary's father did for a living. But it certainly could not have been anything you would expect of royalty. Yet God accomplished his purpose through the town of Bethlehem by choosing this now insignificant couple and family to bring the Savior into the world and nurture him to adulthood.

The humble circumstances of this young peasant couple becomes more obvious when you look at the journey they undertook at the decree of the Roman emperor. **"And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the town of Nazareth, into Judea, to the town of David."** The trek would have taken several days and require them to climb in elevation from Nazareth up to Jerusalem. For us this amounts to little more than an hour's drive. Often you see artist's pictures of Mary riding a donkey. Nothing in

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scripture leads us to believe she rode an animal. Since they were peasants it is unlikely they could have afforded an animal to carry either one of them, so most likely both of them walked. Under good conditions it was a 3 day trek and may well have taken 4 or more. Every step they took must have reminded them of their humble circumstances. But God chose this insignificant family to accomplish his purposes.

This is the way God often works. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: **“But God chose the ...lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.”** God did not come to this earth in all his splendor and glory to amaze us or scare us into believing in him. Rather, He comes to us with the message of forgiveness of sins and the promise of adoption through Christ. He does this through means that seem insignificant to us human beings. He brings a little child to faith by connecting his Word to water in baptism. Though outwardly insignificant His Word has the power to strengthen your faith and look to him for power to avoid sin.

God always accomplishes his purposes. He used a heathen emperor and he chose an insignificant family to accomplish his purposes. And through it was his plan to bring about a miraculous birth.

The carpenter and his wife traveled to Bethlehem to comply with the emperor's decree. But had his hand in the whole scenario. Not even the man and his wife could know what a miracle this birth really was.

They both understood that God had ordained that this would be a special birth. The conception and birth of this child was not the result of any human desire to have children. To be sure Joseph had had his doubts. They had not been engaged long when Mary became pregnant. Joseph thought he should do the only sensible thing and divorce her before the marriage was official. But in a dream an angel had convinced him that the conception of this child was a miracle of the Holy Spirit. He did not argue with or question the angel. This was a miracle of God. His virgin fiancée' was going to be the mother of the Savior.

But the miracle didn't end with that. The child born with no human father was God himself. For Matthew quotes the prophet Isaiah: **“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’--which means, “God with us”.**

The full implications of this can be seen in what St. Paul says to the Colossians: **“In Christ all the fulness of the Deity lives in bodily form.”** God became one of us. He lowered himself and came down to our level. He made himself vulnerable to hurt, rejection, hunger, fatigue and worst of all, death.

The miracle of God taking on human flesh is even more of a miracle when you consider that this was all a part of God's eternal plan to rescue you and me from eternal banishment from him. Every nasty word we've ever said, every time we look down our noses at someone as though we're better than they, every time we self-righteously

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thought we were doing God a favor by coming to church was another sin that God planned to pay for through the perfect obedience and faultless death of his Son the God-Man. Because you see, God's real purpose was not simply to show his power in fulfilling a prophecy or in making a heathen emperor a pawn in his plan, nor was it to exalt an insignificant family. His real purpose was to provide complete forgiveness of sins to a world of undeserving sinners like you and me.

It is amazing how we can get quite upset and worried about preparing for Christmas, getting the tree, complaining about how long the lines are at the store, or how some people refuse to wear a mask to protect themselves and others. If only we would stop for a moment and realize that God's purpose in making Christmas possible for us is not for glitter and fluff. He accomplished his purpose of sending his son to be born, a human child, in a forgotten little town for you and me. And because he did, you will never have to fear the terrors of death and hell. Because God accomplished his purpose we will have life beyond the grave. A life filled with God's richest blessings. Thank God he accomplished his purpose, through a small town, through and insignificant couple for you and me. Amen.