

ADVENTure: Set the Controls For Zero

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Isaiah 9:1-7; Micah 5:2; Luke 2:1-7

Our final Scripture reading today is Luke 2:1-7. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy, infallible Word. “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 Judea, 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.”

Last week, we started a journey through time. We hijacked the Wayback Machine and did a mad dash through over 4,000 years of history. We saw how the Old Testament points towards the need for a Messiah, giving us clues about Him. We saw figures like Abraham and Moses and David who were prototypes for the Messiah. We also heard prophecies detailing the Messiah’s birth and life and death and resurrection. We recognized how awesome it is to live in this point in time rather than when the Messiah was just a rumor and a hope and a dream.

So hopefully you’ll indulge me with a little storytelling, a bit out of the norm from my typical sermon, because I want us to look at the birth of Jesus a little differently. I want to get inside what happened. So we’re going to pick up where we last left off, in the Wayback Machine hurtling through time, checking out different biblical eras.

Just as we think we’ve gotten a grip on this time travel thing, trouble is a-brewing. Somebody set the controls of the Wayback Machine to the year 0. Only one problem: there is no year zero. There’s a 1 BC and a 1 AD. The Wayback Machine tries to understand the input and deposits us into the wilderness of Galilee as it crashes. But it’s broken down; it’s going to take a while to fix. Some of us stay behind to get it running again.

Through the wonderful mysteries of the Wayback Machine, you find yourself taking on the identity of a turn-of-the-1st century Jew from the line of King David. You know the language; you can communicate with those around you; you even can make earthenware pots and pans you can sell to survive while you wait for the Wayback Machine to be fixed. Trust me – it all sounds crazy, but it will make sense here in a minute.

You live on the northern outskirts of Israel, in a small village near Nazareth – itself no more than seventy households. Life is harsher than you’d expected. For one, most everyone is dirt poor. A few people can afford a better living – especially those wicked tax collectors who rob us all and claim it’s just business. But it’s not uncommon for a family to own a few animals for milk and eggs that they keep on the lower level of their home. Everyone sleeps upstairs in an upper room – the same word used for an “inn.” The downstairs is for eating, cooking, and everyday life. And if you’re quite poor, it’s where you stable your animals when it gets cold.

A wealthier person might have an animal to help with plowing – otherwise, it's done by the work of your own back. Even the wealthy keep a plot of land that they have someone, a hired hand or servant, tend for them. And everyone's fortunes rise and fall on whether the crops come in lean or healthy. Most people have a family with several children in a home with a few hundred square feet built on a dirt slab, and perhaps a couple hundred more feet upstairs. When you arrive in the summer, people sleep on their roofs in order to catch a breeze.

Everybody's complaining about the Romans. The Roman government isn't terribly oppressive; they allow the Jews to practice their religion unimpeded. They don't require them to make an offering to Caesar, which is standard in all the pagan temples. They do require you to pay taxes to Rome, though, and that's tough. You don't have much money to begin with.

And you can't avoid the Romans in Galilee. They live close, they are good for trade, and they hire Jewish workers for their building projects. That would be a big "no-no" in Jerusalem, where the Romans are considered the enemy, but up here on the fringes of Jewish society, you have to make a living, even if that means working alongside the pagans sometimes.

But there's a lot of discontent brewing. The Romans don't belong here; this is not their land. We might be under their thumb, but God will deliver us from them – at least that's what's said at the synagogue in Nazareth where everyone meets on Saturday mornings. And some people have tried to do God's job for Him. You know a local man you once did business with who stirred up trouble, claiming he was God's messiah and inciting a riot with a local Roman garrison. He wound up crucified for his trouble.

If you've been surprised by the rebels and discontents, the people that call themselves "Pharisees" stunned you even more. Most Pharisees live much closer to Jerusalem, since they believe faithful people want to live as close to the temple as possible. But the Pharisees often surprise you. They aren't kind or friendly people, least of all not to the Romans.

But they are respected in the synagogue, and it's no wonder. These folks seem to be pursuing holiness like nobody's business. They put your spiritual practices – everyone's spiritual practices – to shame. They are certain to give their full tithe – they tell everybody so. Even the smallest plants in their garden, they tithe. They fast twice a week. They pray aloud declaring how thankful they are that God has made them righteous and not sinners. Whenever the synagogue is open, they take the seats of authority. They know the latest debates between rabbis and are always proclaiming the newest ruling on how to be a law-abiding Jew.

The Pharisees have added all sorts of practices to their lives to make sure they never break God's law as they understand it. One of them even got a black eye the other day because he refuses to look at any woman for the risk of temptation. He closed his eyes, kept walking, and fell right over his own feet. Now some of their rules interpret Scripture in weird ways – they have found all sorts of ways to do what they want on the Sabbath and to take advantage of poor people. They assume the really poor are that way because they did something wrong and God is punishing them. They are incredibly short on mercy. But they do seem really interested in following God's law. As soon as they can afford it, they'll move out of this backwater of compromise to Jerusalem where all the really holy people live.

After several months blending in, there's an edict – Caesar wants everybody in his realm counted. Over the course of a season, everyone has to return to their ancestral hometown for the census. As a descendent of David, you've got to travel to Bethlehem...a three-day journey by foot for a young man in the best of conditions. Now only men have to be counted, but entire villages will caravan together for safety. Everyone waits to leave until the end of harvest.

Because it's the ancestral home about a half-day's walk from Jerusalem, everybody's got a third cousin somewhere they might stay with. The problem is, Bethlehem's a tiny place. It'll be jam-packed. Not everyone's going to arrive on the same day, but people are going to stay for a while. It's too big and expensive a trip not to stick around to see family, to worship at the temple, to sell goods to new clientele. Many people plan to set up camp for a few months.

So you pack up your goods and head out one cold and blustery day with a big group of families heading to their hometowns. A couple hours in, you notice that Mary and Joseph are with you. You haven't really spoken to them before; they've kept to themselves, mostly. You've heard rumors of scandal...a pregnancy out of wedlock, a misunderstanding, a quick marriage. In the villages, people live on gossip, and it's been flying. What really happened?

Some folks think Mary's gone crazy...she believes she's totally innocent, that God has given her some sort of special child. Most of her friends have shunned her, and she went away for a little while on a trip, supposedly to see her cousin Elizabeth. But now she is very pregnant. The younger girls whisper that she's going to slow down the caravan; why is she even coming? But with all the stares, you think Joseph is wise to keep Mary by his side. After all, an adulteress is stoned to death in ancient Israel. Once the baby arrived, she could be in real danger.

The trip is tiring but generally uneventful. You eventually start up a conversation with Joseph, who turns out to be the gentlest, most God-fearing man you've met on this adventure. After gaining each other's trust, he addresses the rumors he's sure you've heard. He tells you the surprising news that an angel of the LORD appeared to him in a dream. That angel told him to take Mary as his wife – that her baby is of the Holy Spirit. “You trust your dream?,” you ask. “I trust my God and my wife,” he says. “Yeah, but...you don't have any doubts?”

“I don't, because I know Mary. I've known her all my life. So has everyone around here. She never fit in with the other girls because her mind is always on how to please the LORD. It's one of the reasons I fell in love with her,” he says. He goes on, “How many young women do you know would say, “I am the servant of the LORD; may it happen to me as you have said” when told that they'll carry a baby that will make them an outcast? How many young women after that news would write a song of praise to the LORD? God is doing something very special with her. I am just thankful God has seen fit to bring me into His plans.”

Before the week is out, you finally arrive at your destination. Bethlehem is bursting at the seams, and there's no room for everyone. People are opening their homes to relatives, but it's simply not enough. You stake your tent out in the fields with many others. Families without contacts or tents are taking shelter in the caves that line the outskirts of Bethlehem. There are a lot of people to count – it's going to be a long time before Bethlehem returns to normal.

Things are so hectic, business so booming, life so tiring trying to get daily food, that you lose track of your caravan mates. You know it will be a couple months before you head home anyway. But one night, long after everyone's gone to sleep, there's a commotion outside your tent, and you hear the clatter of several young men running and excitedly talking to each other. Someone crashes through your tent. "Sorry," he says breathlessly, "but we're in a hurry. The Messiah has been born! There were angels and singing and...well, just come with us!"

You wrap something warm around yourself and head into the sleepy village. There's a crowd of shepherds around a dingy little house. As you press your way inside, you see animals meandering around, an upper room packed with people, a child in a feeding trough...and there're Joseph and Mary, obviously worn out, but also with that glow of incredibly proud new parents.

The shepherds talk to them, asking questions, telling their story of an encounter with angels out in the fields while they were at work. They are fawning over this new baby, Yeshua, Jesus – which means "the LORD saves." Whatever they saw in the fields has made them completely forget their shepherding duties. As the morning dawns, they go to the marketplace telling the news that the Messiah has come. Not everybody believed them – after all, who believes low-life shepherds? But some did, and they were amazed about what they were told.

As the shepherds slowly disperse, Joseph comes up to you in the doorway as Mary dozes off. "Didn't I tell you? God is at work here. He is doing something incredible. I do not pretend to understand it all, or how it happened. But this boy...this child I will raise as my own...watch for Him. He's going to save us. He'll change everything. I believe it now more than ever."

And yet, you look at Jesus...so small, tiny, helpless. Is this how kings start? Is this the Savior of the world? You are reminded of the words of Isaiah 53 – "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." This boy has no special birthmark, no physical sign of being the Son of God. He's from the line of David, but so are you, and David lived a thousand years ago. What does this all mean?

A couple months pass, and eventually the hubbub about Jesus' birth and the shepherds dies down. Just about the time everyone's thinking about heading home, there's a strange arrival. Several foreigners arrive in town. Their strange accents and odd clothes prove they aren't from the Roman Empire. And they're asking about a baby born King of the Jews. And wouldn't you know it? They stop at the ramshackle home where Mary and Joseph are staying.

The next day, as you make preparations to head back to Galilee, a friend of a friend tells you the strangers were actually foreign dignitaries, stargazers maybe from Babylon, who brought incredibly expensive gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. His story makes you laugh at first – who brings gifts like that to a family so poor they have to live in a relative's stable? But then it makes you wonder...how did they know? These people who have nothing to do with our culture, our beliefs, our God, they recognize Jesus as our King.

Then you get a little reflective...what foreign dignitaries would give a child spices meant to embalm the dead? It's a morbid gift. Jesus is supposed to rescue God's people from the Romans. Does that gift mean they expect He will die for God's people? It's hard to say.

As your caravan gathers your final day in Bethlehem, it's clear strange things are afoot. For one, the foreigners are gone – up and vanished. Maybe they're just anxious to get back home after so many months away. But that's just the tip of the iceberg. Joseph and Mary and the baby are gone too. One person guesses they left with the foreigners. A rabbi with a strong grasp of the Scriptures wonders about Hosea 11 where God says, "When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." He believes they've headed there. But why would a young family head out in the middle of the night, without a caravan, without protection against the bandits who attack lone strangers on the roads? No one really knows.

The wagons are loaded up, the children are counted, and the long journey back to Nazareth begins. People can't stop talking about what they've seen and heard about this Jesus. Some scoff; others laugh; still others reverently give praise to God for sending Jesus and pray that He might be the one to finally rescue Israel. It's the talk for the first few hours of the trip.

But as you reach Jerusalem, a sight fills you with a strange fear...there's a small troop of the royal palace guard, King Herod's men, and they've just made the turn onto the road to Bethlehem. Their faces are filled with fear, anger, grief. Something's not right. Why would the palace guard go to little Bethlehem? Perhaps it's better not to know. You hear later of the catastrophe, and you're grateful the families in your caravan were spared their young boys.

As weeks and months go by, you have time to reflect on your journey before the Wayback Machine is fixed and we head on to our next adventure. What's most striking is just how you can't get your mind off the little one they called Jesus. You were there; you saw Him; you met His parents; you heard the stories; you know that somehow, God was doing big things. It's all so real, so alive!

And yet, it takes faith. Even if you were there, it takes believing Mary, believing Joseph, believing the shepherds, believing the wise men. The evidences are real and they're all there, you heard the eyewitnesses yourself and it seems believable, but it takes faith to believe that the impossible has become possible, that God has come to earth in the form of the Son. Jesus will grow up and live and die and live again and say to His disciple Thomas, "You see and believe. Blessed are they who do not see and yet believe."

As you take one last look around Nazareth as you ready yourself for your trip into the future, as your memories return, you realize that this tiny place, this hamlet in the middle of nowhere, this is where Jesus will live for nearly thirty years, where He will grow to be a man, where He will faithfully follow His Heavenly Father without fail even in obscurity when no one is watching. He will grow up to be a servant king. He will die for His people. He will live again to restore us all to new life. And yes, you believe it all.