

THE CHRISTMAS LESSON

Dr. George O. Wood

Our scripture today is from the second chapter of the gospel of Luke. Some familiar words, the first seven verses. “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that all the world would be enrolled. [I automatically lapsed into the King James on that. The NIV says, “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the Roman world. This was the first census which took place when Quirinius was governor of Syria.”

We might ask, Why is Syria in here? At that time the nation of Israel as we know it today was administratively under the province of Syria. “Every one went to his own home town to register. So Joseph always 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. She gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in strips of cloth and placed him in a manger because there as no room for them in the inn.”

I call this message today, “The Christmas Lesson.” We read the Christmas story. What is the Christmas lesson, which flows off the Christmas story?

I’ll begin with a little humorous incident that I think could only have happened in southern California where people can go sailing in December rather than freezing in the cold northwest of the country. Aren’t you glad that God has called you to live in southern California? I look at these TV news reports of blizzards in the northeast and in the great lakes area and I say I don’t understand how anybody can continue living there when there’s California to live in. I have no desire to go back to snow. Maybe to look at it from a distance on TV. But that’s about the extent of my interest in freezing. Give me the warm weather!

This story takes place in the Christmas season. It was just a few days before Christmas. A couple of guys who were real good friends decided to go sailing rather than shopping with their wives. What red-blooded male wouldn’t rather take an opportunity like that than to be dragged along through the crowded aisles of the shopping mall? However while the men were out in the sailboat a storm arose. And it as kind of a fierce kicker! The sea became very turbulent and the guys were having difficulty getting the boat back to shore, to the dock. As they maneuvered their way toward the land they hit a sand bar and grounded on the sand bar. Both of them jumped out of the boat and stood on the sand bar in water practically up to their waist trying to push the boat off the sand bar. The one guy with his knees buried deep into the mud by this time says to his friend who is being wildly whipped around by the wind and the waves, ‘This sure beats Christmas shopping, doesn’t it?’

Maybe some of us in this room would do anything to get out of Christmas shopping. Or shopping at anytime of the year.

But on the other hand, thank the Lord that some in this room have a special gift for that very kind of activity. The Christmas tree really would be bear without those special talents.

For many people I think the lesson of Christmas is get your shopping done early. For others Christmas we know means nothing more than simply the holiday season. I get Christmas cards

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from companies that do business with the church. They're very, very careful at what they say because they don't want to alienate any customer. There are Christmas cards out there that bend over backwards to omit the word "Christmas." Yuletide or holiday seasons or holiday greetings. But it's evidently offensive to some people to even use the word "Christmas."

For some the lesson of Christmas is just get through it.

Our reading from Luke's gospel today gives us a deeper and a right meaning to Christmas. For there is more to the Christmas story than the words of the text. There is what Christmas is telling us about God and about ourselves. That's why I said this message today would be the "the Christmas Lesson."

Several observations about the Christmas lesson that I want to put forward to you that I think flow out of these verses that we're looking at.

The first Christmas lesson is simply that God is in control even when it appears different than that. When it seems that maybe God isn't in control, yet this text of scripture is telling us, God is in control.

"In those days there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled." It was God working through the plans of the emperor that was ordering in a distant land his servants, Mary and Joseph to the town of Joseph and Mary's family origin that scripture might be fulfilled. God moved a piece of action thousands of miles away so that in a domino kind of fashion he might trigger a sequence of events which would bring the Messiah into the world born at precisely the right place.

It's no accident that Luke begins the Christmas story with that phrase "In the days of Caesar Augustus" because it's Luke's understanding and it's all Christians understanding that consider the Christmas story that this issuing of the decree was no accident. That it was God's planning. It was God's instrumentality to bring that family from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Here was the great Gaius Augustus, that was Caesar Augustus' given name. He was the grand nephew and the successor of Julius Caesar. He ruled the world for 44 years. Beginning his reign in 30 B.C at the young age of 33. It is said that when he came to Rome he found it brick. When his reign was over he left it marble. He was a magnificent Caesar in terms of power and might. But the scripture says that God got into his head with an idea to declare a census of the world at just the right time.

The early Christians knew what had really happened with Caesar. That the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had stirred him up, to cause him, the mighty Caesar to do God's bidding. God could have helicoptered had he desired Mary and Joseph from Nazareth down to Bethlehem. Or he could have had the angels fly them down from angel express, overnight delivery. But he chose instead to use a decree of Caesar to guide Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem.

This was such an important lesson for the early church, to recognize that God was behind human power and human Caesars. In the first century the believers in Jesus Christ, lived and died and suffered under four emperors. There was Augustus Caesar under who Jesus was born. There was of course Caesar Tiberius under whom Jesus died. There was Caesar Nero under whom the early Christians experienced their first great suffering. And there was Caesar Domitian who at

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the time of John and the writing of revelation smashed his fist into the body of Christ and persecuted and killed Christians by the thousands.

These early Christians in dealing with that kind of adversity from Caesar's thrown learned a tremendous lesson about history. That is that God is in control. Behind human thrones is the providence and controlling instrumentality of God. The kingdoms of this world may not recognize it but one day they are headed for a great climatic moment in which the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our God and of his Christ. And he will reign forever and ever. The fact that Jesus is born under Caesar's administration suggests to us, given 2000 years looking back that obviously Jesus has become greater not only among Christians but in the secular world Jesus is a far more recognized figure today than was Caesar Augustus in his time. It is God's plan to de-magnify every human power and authority and to exalt and magnify the name of Jesus until the point comes when every knee will confess by bowing that Jesus Christ is the Lord.

From the human vantagepoint it often seems like God is not active in history at all. It may even seem to you that God is not very active in your own life. Who could have in that moment when Caesar issued the decree who would have been wise enough to see at that moment behind that decree the hand of God? And who is wise enough in our own lives to see the hand of God in some turnings of the road that occur in our own personal destinies that at the time it happens we may not see it. But only later perspective gives us an understanding. God was ruling and overruling in my life.

Isaac Williams in a marvelous little work about the nativity says this about how God stirred up Caesar. "The unfathomable depths of the divine counsels were moved. The foundations of the great deep were broken up. The healing of the nations was issuing forth. But nothing was seen on the surface of human society but the slight rippling of the water."

That is the way it is so often with God's work. Nothing is seen to the naked eye but a slight rippling of the water. But it is that breaking up of the deep which is going to issue forth in the destiny, which God has planned for us and for the human race.

Christians know this about God. He is in control. Because he is in control we know that at times he does not act in a particular way that we might expect him to. Or that we would like. He may not act in a way that we would guess because he chooses to do it his way. We understand beginning right with the Christmas story that God is fitting all things together for his purposes. Even the decree of a government. We must see that in our own lives as well. God is the final answer. God is in control.

A marvelous thing about the Christmas lesson also secondly, is we find in the Christmas lesson is God leads us indirectly. The census was a means of direct leadership. He did not speak with a divine voice to tell Mary and Joseph to get to Bethlehem. In fact as I look at the Christmas story I wonder why Mary and Joseph waited so long to get to Bethlehem that they are literally arriving on the eve of delivery. If they had come a month or two earlier they would have arrived in sufficient time to set up house.

I know thinking back to the time when Jewel was expecting our first child and the hospital was only two blocks away. I planned to be ready for that eventuality. There could be no lurches in plans. No lack of car to take her to the hospital. I had to be present. I remember one time

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dreaming at night that the birth had come and I couldn't get my clothes on fast enough. I woke up in a cold sweat the idea of a child coming into the world and not being ready to be delivered at the hospital.

So is this a dereliction of parental responsibility that they linger up there in Nazareth, their hilltop home so long that finally in the ninth month of pregnancy they take that difficult trip down from Nazareth to Bethlehem. A trip that probably took them four to seven days using a donkey, walking along the way. A tough time. Why did they wait?

I would suggest to you a guess that maybe one of the reasons they waited is they like us, being human beings were waiting for some direct, divine word from the Lord. I wonder if on a daily basis Joseph didn't go to Mary and say something like this, "Has the angel come back yet and told you when we are supposed to leave or what we're supposed to do?" "No," she would say. "An angel hasn't come today."

In fact, the angel never came back. After making the initial announcement that she would be expectant with Jesus, Gabriel does not return to the situation. I wonder if they were waiting for another angelic visit. Or since Joseph was so wonderfully led by dreams if Mary wouldn't say to him, "Joseph, I know before that God guided you through dreams. Have you had a dream yet that's told you what to do?" Joseph would say, "No, I don't seem to be dreaming of late at all."

Isn't it interesting if you look at your own life there are periods of life when you seem to dream a lot and other times when you could go for months without a dream? I wonder if it's because there are particular moments in our life when we are wrestling with heavier things in our dream life. I know that my dream life tends to be more active when I'm wrestling with a lot of choices and the like.

But Joseph's dream life, still there is no guidance. I wonder if Mary and Joseph if that moment in their life were consciously aware of the Old Testament phrase in Micah that in Bethlehem of Judea the son of David was to be born I wonder if that is what finally coaxed them out of Nazareth. Other than the decree.

I guess it was the decree. Then as they left they said, Maybe God has allowed Caesar to issue this in order to fulfill his word in Micah. Or maybe they weren't aware of Micah at all. But finally here Joseph I'm sure in those last days before they left Nazareth Joseph was saying to Mary, "I've got to be there by such and such a date. Everybody that comes from Bethlehem has got to get back there. Everybody's going to their ancestral home to be counted. I've got to be back there. Do you think the baby will come?" And Mary would say, "I don't know." Finally Joseph said, "I can't wait any more. I've got to be there. I'll have to go without you." And Mary said, "Don't leave me here alone. I'll go with you."

So they agreed and set off.

I wonder as they left that hilltop community of Nazareth and looked out on the valley below them if they didn't look at each other and wonder if they were making a mistake by leaving so late in the pregnancy.

God was guiding them at that moment in their life indirectly. There were occasions when he had guided them very specifically and very directly. But they, knowing the experience of anyone

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who follows the Lord ultimately comes to grips with, the Lord is leading our life at times in the midst of our own doubt and wonderments and preferences that God would work another way or speak more directly. Still he is at work. Even in the moments of uncertainty. Even in the moments when we lack external divine direction, our life has purpose and design.

The Lord guided Mary and Joseph into the future. They were in his present will by being the kind of people God had called them to be. When we're that kind of person, walking in his will in obedience to the known revelation of God, God can guide us.

This Christmas time maybe this word is especially for you. You don't likewise have some kind of external divine presence that's guiding you. Maybe it's a confusing time in your life. Just because we're confused doesn't mean God is confused. Just because we may feel momentarily abandoned doesn't mean God has abandoned us. The Christmas lesson is saying God is always at work on behalf of his people to accomplish his plans.

A third great lesson of Christ. It's not only that God's in control, not only that God leads indirectly. But God chooses to appeal to us on the basis of love rather than on the basis of power.

If I understand Bethlehem and the birth of the Christ child in the manger then I understand that God is really saying to us, I want you to approach me from an attitude of love and adoration. I didn't send myself to you robed in my garments of white and majesty. I came to you in a very approachable way.

When parents are about to have a baby they go to the best hospital that they can afford. And they get the best delivery doctor that they can get. And they want to be sure that if there's any contingent emergency that highly trained specialists are around. Why do we do this when a baby is about to come into our world. It's not because we feel strong. But because we feel so vulnerable and so weak. And we need the most expert help that we can get.

Yet when God's Son is born he is born in a stable in a very vulnerable place. Born there not because God is weak. But because God is strong and it is strong people who can take risks. It is strong people who can be vulnerable.

In fact, the place where the Lord was born, the manger at the inn. In the New Testament there are two words that can be used for "inn". The word that is used here is the word that describes an inn in which there was not food available. It was not the kind of Holiday Inn that we think of today where you can check into a nice room and eat a good meal. You brought your own food and you didn't have a host. You were given a place where the animals you brought with you could encamp and maybe you slept beside them. It's possible you might have had a room overhead of where the animals were. But it was a very simple place.

Out in a manger, a cave, away from that inn, God let his Son be born. Almost everybody in the first Christmas missed the signs. The baby born in a manger was a small event known only to a few shepherds and to Mary and Joseph. For some still today it is a sign of God being weak or ineffectual if he is believed in the Christmas story. Why would the Lord of glory let himself come in such a poor way. But it's a sign of love.

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Each one of us can feel secure in holding a baby. And God wants us to feel secure in our relationship with him. So secure that he gives us a baby to hold. It is God's desire that even lowly shepherds who were not counted as regular citizens and whose testimony was refused in a court of law, because they were known as liars and cheats. It was his desire that people like that could get in and see the greatest thing that ever happened in the human race.

If Jesus had been born at the Ritz-Carlton the shepherds would have never got in the door. Smelly shepherds wouldn't have made it.

Christmas is God letting us all in to his wonderful love for us. So these three Christmas lessons bring us to consideration of questions.

The first is if indeed the Lord is over all and his power is seen within the Christmas story, that God omnipotent rules, then in my own life and your life have we turned our life over to the Lord's control. The scriptures would indicate to us that God worked through Caesar but nothing is ever said that he worked *in* Caesar. Because the Lord God almighty has limited his power that he will never work in us without our permission. He can only work through us or around us or beside us.

But Christmas, the birth of Christ is saying that Christ wants to work in us. That's why the whole idea of birth is so critical in the Christmas story because we must not only see Christ as being born in the world. We must see him being born into our heart. And God's authority and God's control come into our life at our own permission.

The second question is, Are you in a situation in life where God seemingly is not guiding you? I think the Christmas story is telling us that there is a phenomenon in life. What I might call a cluster of revelation. Moments of unusual divine activity in our life followed by long periods of silence. Mary had this with the angelic visitation followed by long period of silence. Joseph had this with a dream followed by long period of silence. The wise men had a revelation of a star and then they lost sight of it followed by a long period of silence. There is this thing of God sort of compactly in time compressing us and we feel especially at that moment that all of the heavens are open in our lives. Then we must live our lives going on a day by day basis without that same cluster of activity. That's what Mary and Joseph had to do.

We may even wind up in a place not of our own choosing. The manger certainly not would have been my place of choosing. I doubt that it was Mary or Joseph's place of choosing. But the important thing about the place we are in in life, is not the place. But the person who was with us in this place.

If this Christmas is uncomfortable for you and I realize that Christmas for many people is extremely uncomfortable, it is especially uncomfortable if there is tension or division within family or there has been loss by death or divorce or trauma of some kind in the past year. Maybe the place this year is not as cozy and comfortable as it has been in other Christmases. It's not the place of your choosing. It's not where you would elect to be at this moment in your life. It's not where Mary and Joseph, the manger was not the place that they themselves chose. It was the place where they found themselves. But more important than the place you're in is the purpose who is in that place with you. Somehow if Jesus is present with us, whatever place we're in becomes a place of God's glory and God's presence and God's life and God's salvation. Let Jesus be in the place where you are this Christmas.

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Then I suppose the third portion to close off the three great lessons at Christmas is have we responded to God's love?

God is reaching out to us in love at Christmas. Not intimidating us with his vast power. But quietly welcoming us to embrace him and to receive him.

Harry Reasoner of CBS a Christmas or two ago gave an excellent little commentary on Christmas which I want to take the liberty of quoting from for just a moment or two. I always have enjoyed Reasoner's commentaries. I had not realized that he has a Christian profession.

He said, "Eleven years ago in my previous incarnation on this broadcast I did a little Christmas piece [I wish I could talk like Harry Reasoner, by the way] it seemed like a good idea to repeat it. The basis for this tremendous annual outburst of buying things, gift buying, and parties and near hysteria is a quiet event that Christians believe actually happened a long time ago. You can say that in all societies there has been a midwinter festival. And that many of the trappings of our Christmas are almost violently pagan. But you come back to the central fact of the day and the quietness of Christmas morning. The birth of God on earth. It leads you only three ways of accepting Christmas. One is cynically. Is it time to make money or endorse the making of it. one is graciously, the appropriate attitude for non-Christians who wish their fellow citizens all the joys to which their beliefs entitle them. And the third of course is reverently. If this is the anniversary of the appearance of the Lord of the universe in the form of a helpless babe, it is a very important day.

"It's a startling idea of course. My guess is that the whole story that a virgin was selected by God to bear his Son as a way of showing his love and concern for man, it's my guess that in spite of all the lip service given to it, it is not an idea that has been popular with theologians. And indeed the idea of the virgin birth has probably been the most centrally attacked Christian doctrine by theologians. It is a somewhat illogical idea. Theologians like logic almost as much as they like God. It's so revolutionary a thought that it probably could come only from a God that is beyond logic and beyond theology. It has a magnificent appeal. Almost nobody has seen God. And almost nobody has any real idea of what he is like. The truth is among men the idea of seeing God suddenly and standing in a very bright light is not necessarily a completely comforting and appealing idea. But everyone has seen babies and most people like them. If God wanted to be loved as well as feared he moved correctly here for a baby growing up learns all about people. If God wanted to be intimately part of man he moved correctly, for the experience of birth and family hood is our most intimate and precious experience.

"So it comes beyond logic. It is either all falsehood or it is the truest thing in the world. It's the story of the great innocence of God, the baby. God in the power of man. It is such a dramatic shot toward the heart that if it is not true for Christians nothing is true."

God wanted to reach us in love.

A couple of years ago at our annual holy land tour which comes right after Christmas I was in Israel and Jerusalem and one of the leading merchants of Bethlehem has become a personal friend of Jewel's and mine. He and his wife wanted to take us out for dinner one evening. So we arranged a time. He took us of all places to a French restaurant in Jerusalem. I didn't know that such a place existed. I'd only eaten in a French restaurant here in the U.S. about once in my

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life. I don't think I've ever eaten a meal that was as exquisite as that meal in the French restaurant in Jerusalem.

This man who was our host is a member of a family in Bethlehem that is one of the two most influential families living in that city today. They travel the world. They're people of affluence. They're people who are also spiritually hungry. As I sat there in the dinner that evening and we were talking about spiritual matters his wife a young woman in her early 30s said to us very earnestly, "I hear you Christians who come through here all the time talking about being born again. What does that mean?" I had several reactions to that question.

First of all, how could anyone living in Bethlehem not know the answer to that? Then of course when you're in Bethlehem and you realize why. Because much of religion, even Christian religion, is trapped in mystical symbols and has lost the straight out simplicity of the manger. The manger has been guided over with all of the paraphernalia of religious trappings so that it is no longer a simple cave. It is a complicated icon of adoration and worship. These people coming out of a nominal Christian background. She's saying what is it that you Christians mean? What is it to be born again? I thought to myself when I heard that question, What a great opportunity now to give a witness for the Lord.

Before I could even tell her the thought had gone through my mind so quickly about how odd to be from Bethlehem and not know the answer to that and what a wonderful opportunity to where now our faith in the Lord, her husband interrupted and said, "Oh, honey. I know what that means." I thought this is going to be very interesting!

He said, "Honey we've grown up in the church. But that's not what makes you a Christian. What makes you a Christian is this thing called the new birth. It is not the religion you inherit or the faith you grew up with or your parents had. Real Christianity is making a personal decision in your life for Jesus Christ. And inviting him into your heart." And he said, and evidently to her surprise, "I've done this, honey."

In all the places I've been where people talk about the new birth I don't think I've ever heard anyone put it straighter or simpler than that. It's making a personal decision in your life.

Christianity doesn't happen by osmosis. It doesn't happen by being in the right environment long enough. It's a choice we make in life.

Like Mary and Joseph we must say yes to God's revelation. God got Mary's permission before she was impregnated with the Messiah. Had she said no, she would have never been the person God used. But she said yes, "Let it be to me according to that will."

And likewise with us, it boils down to a personal choice. Have we voluntarily and on our own we respond to the love that he is bringing.

If you've not done that in your life this day and this moment is the moment to do that. So that this Christmas is a Christmas you celebrate not as an observer of the Christian scene. But as a participant. As one in whom the Lord himself is born and lives.

Our Lord, we close this time together now in prayer. We say into our hearts come into our heart, Lord Jesus. For friends here today who have not had a time in their life that they've

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personally opened themselves to you and to receive the gift you are bringing, the gift of your life, I pray that in these moment that our heart would welcome you as Lord and Savior.

While your heads are bowed could I just ask for friends here today by an upraised hand, just a non-verbal statement, Pastor I want to receive Jesus Christ into my life. I don't ever remember making voluntarily a conscious choice to welcome Jesus into my life. But I want to do that today. Could I see your hand if you'd like to receive the Lord in your life today, if you've not done that. It's a hand raised to God as a testimony – I receive Jesus Christ into my life.

Our Lord, you see each person and you know each one who had either raised a hand or has wanted to raise a hand to you today. We ask that you would be the Lord of our lives. Not simply one day a year, but everyday or every year. Thank you for coming into our world. I pray especially now, Lord, too, for those in our church family who are going through times when it looks like things are really not in control. Lord, your word today has reminded us that there is never a moment in which you abandoned your authority or your control. The Bethlehem manger tells us that you may not arrange the circumstances of our life to be convenient, but it does tell us you will always be with us. You'll be with us in those inconvenient and unwelcome circumstances and you will somehow make our own mangers a place of special glory and revelation so that instead of being cast off in that place we look back on it later and there is a special star and a special warmth that shines upon the place we were which was difficult and inconvenient. Your love is reaching us. Your presence cradles us. And we thank you. Bless your people. May this be a glorious Christmas in our homes, in our lives personally. May you be exalted in all. Through our Lord Jesus Christ we give thanks. Amen.