

## **A Savior is Born! (Part 2)**

**Luke 2:1-20**

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Last Sunday we began to study this most well-known passage in the Scripture, except perhaps from John 3:16. It is the simple, remarkable record of the birth of Jesus Christ and it's followed by, and we'll study it together, the announcement of that birth to the shepherds. We find ourselves in the middle of the first seven verses, and there we are provided with the record of the birth of Jesus Christ. That is really the point of the first seven verses of Luke chapter 2. Luke here briefly recounts the details surrounding the birth of Jesus; but understand that he does so with a design. He specifically writes in order to stress that the birth of Jesus perfectly fits the divine plans for the long-promised, long-awaited Messiah. Notice down in verse 11, which Lord willing we'll get to next week, the angels announce this child as Christos, Messiah, the Lord. The first seven verses really lay out the evidence to prove that audacious claim.

Last week we saw that Jesus was born at the right time. That's the message of the first three verses. He's qualified to be Israel's Messiah because he was born at exactly the right time. We considered the time clues that Luke provides us, the census that Caesar Augustus ordered in 8 B.C. that was executed in 5 or 6 B.C. in Israel. We looked at the dates for the rulership of Quirinius governor of Syria, and then we added one piece that Luke doesn't give us here, and that is the death of Herod the Great in the spring of 4 B.C. Now when you put those clues together, we're able to build the tight window for Jesus's birth. It was 4 to 6 B.C. He was likely born in the winter, as we saw when you constructed from the rotation of the priests and Zacharias's, the father of John the Baptist, service in the temple, and you put that together with the timeline of the pregnancy and birth of John the Baptist and of Jesus, you land on the winter, probably in the year 5 or 6 B.C. Likely in December, possibly on December 25th, we don't know, it's uncertain; but based on the clear statement of Hippolytus of Rome writing before the year 210 A.D., we have reason to believe that that was an ancient tradition.

But the bottom line is this: as Galatians 4:4 says, "When the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son to be born of a woman." The point you need to get is that Jesus was born at exactly the right time historically. Obviously for reasons like the Roman peace, the *pax romana*, and the Greek

language. But more importantly than that, Jesus was born at the right time biblically. You see, five hundred years before his birth, Daniel in Daniel chapter 9 verse 25, prophesied that the Messiah would live exactly four hundred and eighty-three years after the decree to rebuild the city of Jerusalem following the Babylonian captivity. Come back tonight and we'll examine that great prophecy in Daniel 9 in detail as we continue to study the book of Daniel. And by the way I'm not smart enough to have arranged that to happen tonight, the Lord did that, but it's a perfect fit for what we're studying this morning. You see the point is: Jesus was born at exactly the right time to be Israel's Messiah.

Now today I want us to move on in this text to see secondly that Jesus is qualified to be the Messiah because he was born to the right family. This is the message of verse 4 and the first part of verse 5. Notice what Luke writes: "Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David."

Mary and Joseph were both from Nazareth, a town with probably not more than two to five hundred people, a small little village, a backwater town in the Galilee. We know very little about Joseph, we know that he worked as a carpenter because in Matthew chapter 13 verse 55 Jesus is called "the carpenter's son." The Greek word by the way for carpenter can refer to a carpenter in the sense that we know of it and speak of it, it can also refer to a mason, can refer to a woodworker. Justin Martyr who was born in 100 A.D., just four years after the death of John the Apostle, he writes this: "When Jesus was among men, he made plows and yokes and other farm implements." So, we know that Joseph was a carpenter. We also know that Joseph was relatively poor. The way we know that is, forty days after the birth of Jesus, Joseph and Mary take Jesus to the temple as the Law required to dedicate him as the firstborn to the Lord and, instead of apparently being able to afford a lamb to offer in sacrifice; they instead offered the alternative the Law allowed to those who couldn't afford to do so: either two turtledoves or two pigeons.

But the most important thing about Joseph is not that he was a carpenter or that he was relatively poor, it was that he was a direct descendant of David. Notice verse 4: "He was of the house and family of David." We'll come back to that in a moment. But notice verse 5 introduces us to the other half of the couple, introduces us to Mary. Verse 5 says he went to Bethlehem "in order to

register along with Mary, who was engaged to him." Now Scripture doesn't tell us of how old Joseph and Mary were when they were engaged, but most men in the first century, most Jewish men, were married before they reached the age of twenty. Most Jewish girls were engaged shortly after puberty; often between the years of 13 and 15. It's possible that Mary was in her late teens but based on what went on in that culture it's not likely. The Greek form of Mary's name is Maria, she's named after Moses's older sister Miriam. We again know some things about Mary. We know, for example, that she was a virgin, we'll come back to that because the Scripture is clear to make that an important point. We also know from her Magnificat, the wonderful poem that she wrote celebrating God's goodness to her in allowing her to bear the son of God, we know that she was a devout Old Testament believer, who at 13 or 14 years of age knew the Scripture and understood profoundly the character of God. Notice in verse 5, Luke also describes her as being engaged. Now Matthew tells us that about 3 months, 3 to 4 months into Mary's pregnancy, Joseph married her in response to the command of the angel Gabriel. That's in Matthew 1 verse 24. But Joseph kept her a virgin until after the birth of Jesus, so it's as if they were just engaged, that's why Luke refers to their relationship that way here. They had not consummated the marriage; they were officially married but still behaving as engaged. Now because of the decree of Caesar Augustus Joseph headed to Bethlehem, notice, "with Mary."

Now why did Joseph take Mary with him? I mean you can immediately think of several reasons why he wouldn't, right? She's 9 months pregnant, it's a long journey, she's leaving her home, her family, it's an arduous journey, a difficult one and who knows what happens on the way, maybe she needs to give birth early. There are a lot of reasons he could have left her but he doesn't, why? What are the reasons he took her? Well, he knew she was near to delivering a child and if he left her alone in Nazareth, she might bear the brunt of insult and slander because there was no human father known. Undoubtedly, another reason is that they just wanted to be together when Mary gave birth. There is a third possible reason and that is Mary and Joseph were both committed Old Testament believers who loved the Scriptures. They knew that Mary was close to give birth to the Messiah and they may have known, in fact I would say probably knew, that the Scripture prophesied the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Those may or may not be true; but Luke provides the compelling reason that Joseph took Mary with him, and that's that Mary was also required to register. Notice verse 5, "in order to register along with Mary." The implication is that

Mary was also required by law to be present in Bethlehem for the census, to register as required by law. Historians tell us that in the Roman Empire, specifically in Syria, that women who were twelve and older were required to pay a poll tax and so therefore they also had to be numbered in a census. So here's Mary a young virgin and Joseph the village's carpenter, a poor, unknown couple, recently married but still living as if they were not; living in a tiny backwater town called Nazareth. A very unlikely pair to become the parents of the Son of God.

So why is it that God chose them? Well, you might say, and you'll be right to say that it is solely an act of sovereign grace. It's not that God saw something especial in Joseph and Mary, that they somehow weren't sinners, that they deserved something from God; just like everything else God does for fallen mankind, it was pure grace. You may also say that God chose this humble couple so that in the end they wouldn't be the point of the Christmas story but their child would be. But there's one reason that is above all the others and that is these two poor, humble, unknown people shared one essential qualification, and it's a qualification neither of them had anything to do with: they were born into the right family, they were both descendants of David. Why is that important? Because without that Jesus could not be the Messiah. You remember back in 2 Samuel, David intended, having defeated the enemies of Israel, to build a house for God, and God said "no you can't do that David your hands are littered with blood, the blood of the wars you fought, and so it'll be your son Solomon who builds the house for me, but because of my plans David and because of your heart, I will build a house for you," God says, not like a physical house but a dynasty. And this is what God said to David, 2 Samuel chapter 7 verse 16: "Your house and your kingdom shall endure before me forever; your throne will be established forever." God promised David that a descendant of his would always sit on the throne.

And that becomes the important part of who the Messiah would be. When you come to that passage we read this morning and heard sung together, Isaiah chapter 9 verse 6, it's underscored that He would sit on the throne of David. In Jeremiah 23 verses 5 and 6 God says "I will raise up for David a righteous Branch who will reign as king." You come to the New Testament and that same point is stressed again and again. Matthew 22:42 Jesus says: "What do you think about the Messiah, whose son is He? And they said to him, 'the Son of David'." Turn to Luke chapter 1, because when Gabriel appeared to Mary, this was a point of emphasis in his promise to her. Luke chapter 1 verse

31: "Behold you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High." And notice this, "The Lord God will give him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end." There was even an understanding among the people of Israel who didn't believe in Jesus that the Messiah would be a descendant of David. In John chapter 7 verse 42, they're debating whether or not Jesus is the Messiah and they say this: "Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the descendants of David, and from Bethlehem, the village where David was?" You come to Acts chapter 2 verse 30 and in his sermon on the day of Pentecost, Peter says this: "David knew that God had sworn to him to seat one of his descendants on his throne," and Peter says "it's Jesus of Nazareth, he's the one." So, the Messiah had to be a descendant of David, and notice what Luke tells us here in Luke Chapter 2. First of all, he tells us that Joseph was a descendant of David, notice verse 4: "Joseph was of the house and family of David." In Matthew chapter 1 verse 1, begins "The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David." Jesus is the son of David, and of course chapter 1 of Matthew goes on to lay out Jesus's genealogy through Joseph and it includes David. Matthew chapter 1 verse 20, Gabriel is talking to Joseph and he calls Joseph "the son of David." So Joseph then was a direct descendant of David and the legal heir to David's throne; it's through Joseph that Jesus gets the legal right to the throne.

I don't have the time to take you there and I've developed this at other times in other messages but in Luke chapter 3 you have another genealogy. It's likely the genealogy of Mary, and according to that genealogy Jesus was also a descendant of David through Mary His mother. Mary's line came from David not through Salomon, but rather through another of David's sons, Nathan. So not only did the legal right to the throne belonged to Jesus because he was the adopted son of Joseph; but He had a physical claim to the throne as well through Mary, who was also a descendant of David. That is why Mary had to accompany Joseph to Bethlehem in order to be registered there herself, since she also was a direct descendant of David. Don't miss the large point that Luke is making. Jesus was qualified to be the Messiah because he was born to the right family. Jesus had a legitimate claim to the Davidic promises and specifically to David's throne through not one of His parents, but both of them. So Jesus was born at the right time in order to qualify to be the Messiah and he was born to the right family.

Thirdly, he was born in the right city. He was born in the right city. Verse 4: "Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David." In Jesus's day the city of Bethlehem would have been a village of less than a thousand people, fewer people than can be seated in this auditorium. The city of Bethlehem is only about five or six miles from Jerusalem. It was originally called Ephrata, and then Bethlehem Ephrata, and eventually it just became known as Bethlehem which means the House of Bread. It was a place where grain was raised. In fact, it's interesting, this city was significant even in the Old Testament, do you remember why? It's where the story of Ruth unfolds. It's where Boaz met and married Ruth, and eventually their most famous descendant David was born in the same town and raised there as well. In fact, in 1 Samuel chapter 20 verse 6 Bethlehem is called "David's city," as it is here in verse 4: "the city of David which is called Bethlehem." And so, because of the registration, Joseph takes Mary and they begin the journey from Nazareth in the north to Bethlehem in the south, and some journey it would have been.

Think about this for a moment, my father in law used to say when you read the Bible read it with a sanctified imagination, just think about what this journey entailed. The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem was about 90 miles through the Transjordan. Typically, they would have taken the route just East of the Jordan River, down the Jordan River Valley. It would have taken in the best of circumstances three days, that's about how long it took if you were just traveling through one of the fees from Galilee. But imagine what it would have been like taking that journey; some of you just got back with me from Israel, imagine what it would have been like taking that journey with a woman who is 9 months pregnant, from three to five days, and she's not riding in a luxury vehicle, she is riding instead on the back of a donkey. And you are traversing rugged terrain. You start up at the Sea of Galilee which is 800 feet below sea level and you begin the journey up to Jerusalem and up Bethlehem, it was about five miles, 5-6 miles from Jerusalem; Jerusalem is about 2,900 feet above sea level. There was another problem that complicated their journey and that was the weather. If it was in fact in December as the evidence suggests, then the weather would have been cold and wet. In Israel the rainy season peaks in December and January. The average rainfall in Jerusalem and Bethlehem is about 5 inches in both December and January, and the average daily temperatures are very similar to our own here in North Texas: the fifties during the day and the thirties at night. Just think for a moment about that journey. How much easier would have it been

for Mary to have given birth in her own hometown, in her own home surrounded by family and friends. But the place of Jesus's birth mattered. It mattered because 700 years earlier Micah the prophet had prophesied that when Messiah came he would be born in Bethlehem, just as by the way was the understanding in John 7:42: "The people said is not the Messiah to be born in Bethlehem?" Where did they get that idea? Well it was from Micah 5 verse 2, listen to Micah's prophecy: "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be a ruler in Israel," and this is a unique ruler, "His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity." Luke wants us to know that Jesus was born in the right place, in the very place that God had prophesied 700 years before the Messiah would be born. And think about what God did to accomplish that. God moved literally Heaven and Earth, He moved the entire Roman Empire, he put it in the heart of Caesar Augustus that a census be taken, and everybody in the Roman Empire is being counted, and they're all going back to their home cities, why? Because God had a plan that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

Luke also explains to us here in our text that Jesus was born in the right circumstances. That's the message of the middle of verse 5 down to verse 7. And the circumstances of Jesus's birth were truly extraordinary. Look at them with me, verse 5. Joseph went to Bethlehem "in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child." Mary had, remember, recently married Joseph but they were still acting as if they were engaged, and yet she was pregnant. Clearly the child that she was carrying wasn't his. This becomes absolutely crucial in the gospel record; the writers of the gospels are crystal clear about this: Mary was still a virgin even when she became pregnant. Go back to Matthew chapter 1, in Matthew's account of the birth of Christ told through the eyes of Joseph. Joseph learned that she was with child, remember Mary had been with Elizabeth for about six months of her pregnancy, with her I should say, when she was six months pregnant. And so, when she returns after those three months, the final three months of Elizabeth's pregnancy, she returns to Nazareth, she's apparently already pregnant; maybe 3 months pregnant. Joseph discovers it, verse 19: "Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly," that is to divorce her, "And when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you will call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.'

Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet Isaiah: 'Behold, the virgin shall be with child', and notice 'the virgin shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,' which translated means, 'God with us'."

Mary was still a virgin when she became pregnant and she remained a virgin until after she gave birth to Jesus, look at verse 24: "And Joseph awoke from his sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus." Listen, understand this: the virgin conception and the virgin birth of Jesus are absolutely crucial to the Christian faith. Why is that? If someone said to you why does the virgin birth matter what would you say? Most Christians would say, "well that's how God protected Jesus from original sin." Well Mary was still a sinner, God had to protect Him regardless because Mary was a sinner as well. The virgin birth isn't about that. The virgin birth is for two reasons. Number one, because it was what God had prophesied; the Messiah how He would be born, He would be conceived according to Isaiah and be born to a virgin, so it had to happen for him to qualify to be the Messiah. But secondly, it was the only means and think about this, the virgin birth was the only means by which the eternal, already existing Son of God could add full humanity. If there had been a man and a woman, what do you have? Another person. Well Jesus was already the eternal Son of God, he was already a person; he didn't need to be another person. Instead what you get with the virgin birth is you get one person with a divine nature that He eternally had, the eternal person who is the Son of God, adding to himself a human nature.

So, the circumstances of this birth were truly unique. A young couple still acting as though they were engaged to be married; but now officially married. A woman who's a virgin who had conceived the child without a man and they're forced to leave their own community, travel 90 miles to Bethlehem in the ninth month of Mary's pregnancy, and verse 6 says, "while they were there." While they were there, while they were in Bethlehem. Luke doesn't tell us how long they've been in Bethlehem when Jesus was born. In fact, notice he does not say, nor even imply that Mary went into labor the night that they arrived in Bethlehem. I know I just rained on all those Christmas pageants out there, but that's not what Luke says. That's how the story is normally told. I acted out the story when I was in the ninth grade, I was in a Christmas pageant and I got to play the part of Joseph, and you know I wasn't a Christian at the time so the thing I loved most about playing the



part of Joseph was the cute girl who was playing Mary. But the way that Christmas pageant unfolded, and the way most Christmas pageant tell the story, Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem at the end of a very long travel day and when they got there they discovered that all the other travelers had arrived earlier, and they learned from a particularly nasty innkeeper that there are no rooms left in the local Motel 6.

Truth is, we don't know how long they were in Bethlehem before Mary gave birth. However at some point after they arrived, probably days later she went into labor, just the way it's expressed in verse 6: "While they were there the days were completed for her to give birth." Her 9-month pregnancy came to its conclusion and it was time for the baby to be born. And that brings us to verse 7 and I don't want you to miss verse 7: "And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." That is truly extraordinary. Let that settle into your soul. With those few brief words Luke records for us history's greatest miracle. The eternal second person of the Trinity stepped down from the light of its eternal existence into the darkness of time and space, and He became one of us. He was born in exactly the same way you and I were born, there's nothing miraculous about the birth of Jesus other than the fact that he was born to a virgin; but the birth itself was not miraculous. Born just as you were born. Notice Luke calls Jesus her first born son. Why is that? Well obviously it's because He was the first child born to Mary, it also implies what we learn elsewhere in the Gospels, and that is that after Jesus's birth, remember Joseph kept her a virgin until she gave birth to Jesus; but the implication is that after Jesus's birth they were a husband and wife. Their marriage was consummated, they had other children. They're recorded for us in the New Testament; in Mark chapter 6 verse 3 we learn the names of Jesus's four brothers, he had four brothers. Mark 6:3 says "Is not this the carpenter," speaking of Jesus, "the son of Mary, and the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon?" his four brothers and it says "Are not his sisters (plural) with us?" We're not told how many sisters he had; but clearly He had at least two. So Jesus grew up then as the oldest, the firstborn in a family of at least seven children, and likely more if there were more than two sisters. But Luke's reference here to Jesus as the firstborn means far more than Jesus had siblings. This is the point: as the firstborn, Jesus enjoyed the right of primogeniture; that is, he had the sole right to everything that belongs to the primary heir. Now as we've already established it's not like Joseph had some great estate to pass on to Jesus, he's making a sacrifice of two turtledoves.

But what he did have to pass on was this: Jesus inherited from Joseph the legal right to the throne of David. He was the firstborn and it was His.

We don't know how long Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem before Jesus was born; but we do know that while they were in Bethlehem they didn't stay in the place you would expect them to stay. Notice how our English text says it: "There was no room for them in the inn." Now when you hear the word "inn", what comes into your mind? Normally we think of some version of an ancient motel where you show up and you give the innkeeper money for the right to stay there, it's a paid arrangement, a paid establishment. That's not the word that Luke uses here. In fact, when Luke wants to speak of a paid establishment like a motel in ancient times, an inn, he uses a different Greek word, it's the Greek word *pandocheion*. That's the word he uses in the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 verse 34. When the Good Samaritan paid for the man who had fallen among thieves to be cared for, put him in a hotel, a motel, an ancient version of that. That's not the word that Luke uses here, instead he uses the word *kataluma*, which simply means a guest chamber. There are two possibilities for what this word means. First of all, it could be "public guest quarters provided by the community," a kind of think an unmanned hostel. There were those around the nation where it wasn't a paid deal but a community said "we're not large enough to have you know, motels and so we're going to create this simple place that travelers can stay because we don't want to put them up in our homes necessarily, doesn't always work out, it's not always convenient, we don't always have space." And so this was, likely this kind of structure would have been a simple 2-story structure; typically with primitive rooms on the second floor and the inner core of the ground floor is where the animals were kept, and if there are travelers with cargo, where that cargo was kept; that open lower floor is also where the servants slept. If that's the kind of lodging that Luke means here then don't be too hard on the innkeeper, because there likely wasn't one. Instead the point Luke would be making if this is what he implies here is that when Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem they found that the unmanned hostel that the community had provided was already full of travelers; it was full of those who had come for the census, likely full of Roman officials who were there to take the census. And so there would have been no room.

But there's a second possible meaning for the Greek word translated "inn" here. It may be public guest quarters like an unmanned hostel, it may also be "guest quarters in a private home." Todd Bolen who is a professor at the Master's University, he's lived in Israel for a long time, teaching students there at the extension campus for Master's in Israel; he writes this:

The view that Joseph and Mary simply arrived late to Bethlehem and accommodations at the local hotel were full is incorrect. The word translated as "inn" is the word *kataluma* which is used elsewhere by Luke and translated as "guest chamber"; or in Mark is translated as "upper room". It's not that Joseph and Mary were late to town, but it's that they were rejected by their family. Clearly they had family members in town, as that was the reason they had returned to Bethlehem for the census. That there was no room in the guest chamber for a pregnant woman indicates that they chose not to make room for this unwed mother. The birth of Jesus in a room where animals lived suggests shame and rejection.

So when Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem, either the local unmanned hostel was full or their family's guest quarters, their family's upper room was no longer available, likely because Mary was pregnant outside of marriage. So, where did they stay? What is the place they eventually landed? Well it was likely a nearby natural cave. Justin Martyr writing in the second century in his dialogue with Trypho; he was an apologist arguing for the Christian faith against those who were attacking the faith, said that Jesus was born in a cave. The Protoevangelium of James, also written in the second century, refers to the cave in which Jesus was born. Origin in his day said there was a well-known cave that had long been identified as the birthplace of Jesus, and the original Church of the Nativity was built over that same cave. It's a cave that you can visit today, it's about 39 feet long by about 10 feet wide. Seems very likely that that cave under today's Church of the Nativity is the place where our Lord was born.

We don't know what else happened in that cave that night. We know Mary and Joseph were there, we know soon the baby would be born; we don't know if there were women there to help, there may have been, there may have been some compassionate women who were there to help this mother give birth. Since they're not mentioned it's also possible that Mary and Joseph dealt with the birth process and with the newborn entirely on their own. What would have happened? Well

again the birth was a normal birth, like some that we in this room have watched. That's how the Son of God entered the world. Soon after birth they would have followed the same process that had been followed for centuries. Typically, with newborns they would cut their navel cord, they would wash the infant with water, and then they would salt the child as an antiseptic. After that they would do what we know Mary did and that is they would wrap the baby in cloths. Wrapping the arms and legs of a newborn with strips of cloth was the common practice for hundreds of years in order to ensure both the security and the warmth of the baby. Actually, go all the way back to Ezekiel more than 500 years before Christ and he describes the process of a newborn. He does so in a context where God is saying to Israel "when I found you, you were like a newborn and nobody had cared for you." And this is how he described it, this is Ezekiel 16:4: "As for your birth, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water for cleansing; you were not rubbed with salt or even wrapped in cloths." So this would have been the common process for a newborn, and undoubtedly it happened with our Lord that night as well. But what was common, we've described, what comes next was not common. Verse 7 says "she gave birth to her firstborn son; she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger." Literally she laid the baby in a feed trough. Jesus was born in a cave where animals were often kept, and he was placed in the feed trough. For 32 years Jerome lived in the adjacent cave under the church of the Nativity, the cave adjacent to the one where Jesus was born. You can still visit that cave today as well, it's where he translated the Latin Vulgate, and according to Jerome in his day the manger as it's described here was still visible and it consisted of a rock groove with plain clay walls in a side cave that was some 10 feet by 10 feet. The bottom line is: there was only one infant in Bethlehem that night who was lying in a stone feed trough carved in a cave used for animals. It's astounding. Why? Why would God do this? I mean think about it, Bethlehem yes, we get that it was prophesied, it had to be in Bethlehem; but why in such humble circumstances? Have you ever thought about that? God could've arranged a totally different set of circumstances. Why? Let me give you some reasons to consider.

God orchestrated the surroundings in which Jesus was born as a picture of several great spiritual realities. First of all, the fact that there was no room for Jesus anywhere but that is a profound picture of the essence of human sin. John chapter 1 verses 10 and 11 say this of Jesus:

He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.

It's a picture. This humble beginning, this cave away from humanity is a powerful picture of that spiritual truth. It is the same truth recorded in Isaiah 53 verse 3: "He was despised and forsaken of men," listen to this, "and we did not", what? "esteem Him." We did not esteem Him. You see the essence of human sin is this: the refusal to esteem Jesus and therefore to abandon yourself to Him completely. If you're here this morning and you're not a follower of Jesus Christ and I were to say to you, "so what are the sins that are in your life that God's most concerned with?" It'd be interesting to know what you would say. Here's the greatest: God sent His Son into the world, and you do not esteem Him enough to humble yourself and accept Him as Lord. That's the greatest sin, it's the one that you would give an account for when you stand before God. We did not esteem Him. It's a picture of human sin.

There's a second spiritual reality pictured in these humble surroundings. The fact that Jesus was born in a stable with absolutely no pageantry, that He slept His first night in this world in a feed trough is a profound picture of His amazing condescension. There's no better way to picture how far down He came than that. Philippians chapter 2 verses 6 and 7 say: "Who, although He existed in the form of God," Jesus existed eternally as God, in the form of God, yet He "did not regard that equality with God a thing to be grasped," a thing to be held on to at all costs, "but He emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men." I think the humble surroundings of His birth only served to picture just how far down He had to come. Think about this for a moment. From Creator to creature, from Heaven to Earth, from the center of the universe literally to total obscurity, from the Ancient of Days to a newborn infant, from unceasing adoration to complete rejection, from the blazing glories of Heaven to a dark cave in which animals stayed, from Heaven's throne to a feed trough. That's how far down He came for us. We see in His humble beginnings His amazing condescension, that He would do that for us.

There's a third lesson in His humble beginnings. The circumstances of His birth are also a picture of His unique nature. He was a fully human child. We see that in what's described here. He was conceived miraculously but He had a normal 9-month gestation, and He had a normal birth process,

and then after His birth He was treated like every other newborn infant. He was bathed and swaddled just like every other human child, because He was human; but He was also at the same time fully God. Go back to Luke chapter 1. Notice again verse 32 as Gabriel tells Mary about His birth, she says not only, the end of verse 32, that he speaks of His humanity, "The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David," but the beginning of verse 32, Gabriel speaks of His deity, His divinity: "He will be great and He will be called the Son of the Most High." Notice verse 35: "The angel answered and said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God'." Go over to verse 76. As Zachariah celebrates his son John the Baptist, the forerunner, the one who will announce the Messiah, he says this in verse 76: "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; because you will go on before," notice what he says, "the Lord to prepare His ways." He was fully man, but He was fully God. And so when you come to Luke chapter 2 verse 11; as the angel announces to the shepherds, he says "today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Messiah the Lord." The Lord. This is His unique nature.

It says the Council of Chalcedon, put it in the Chalcedon Creed, it describes Jesus this way:

He was at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood. Truly God and truly man. Of one substance with the Father as regards His Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards His manhood, like us in all respects except for sin.

Think about that. He was just like you, is just like you, in all respects except for sin. And that's pictured in His humble surroundings. You see in the circumstances of His birth; you see that He was human and you see that He was more than human.

There is a fourth spiritual lesson here, and that's ultimately the human birth of the God's eternal Son is an everlasting portrait of God's love for the world and His love for you. His love for you. John 3:16: "God so loved the world (of humanity), that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." You see in the scene we just looked at together, God's love manifested. You're familiar with John 3:16, let me take you to a text that may not be as familiar, but it's just as powerful and more specific. Turn to 1 John chapter 4,

verse 8: "The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love." This is 1 John 4:8. God is love. And how was God's love demonstrated? Verse 9: "By this the love of God was manifested in us (or among us), that God has sent His only begotten Son," and by the way don't be confused about that expression, that doesn't mean that God's Son as God's Son was somehow birthed and began, as some of the cults teach; rather that phrase simply means God's one-of-a-kind, his unique Son. It's used of Isaac in relation to Abraham and Isaac was not his first son, Ishmael was. Instead it was his beloved son, special son, his one-of-a-kind son, and that's what it's being said about Jesus. God has sent his unique, one-of-a-kind "Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation," the satisfaction of God's wrath against "our sins." Jesus was born in order to die in the place of spiritually destitute sinners, beggars, spiritual beggars like us. And the cave and the feed trough powerfully picture those realities, because in the end that wasn't a description of Him, it was a description of us.

Martin Luther writes:

When I am told that God became man, I can follow the idea, but I just do not understand what it means. For what man, if he were God, would humble himself to lie in the feed box of a donkey or to hang upon a cross? God laid upon Christ the iniquity of us all. This is the ineffable and infinite mercy of God, which the slender capacity of man's heart cannot comprehend, much less utter, that unfathomable depth and burning zeal of God's love toward us. Who can sufficiently declare this exceeding great goodness of God?

Listen, if you're here this morning and you doubt the love of God for you, then look at the manger, and then look past the manger at the cross. If you're here this morning and you're not in Jesus Christ, if you've never come to be His follower, understand this is your only hope. We're going to see next week where the angel says to the shepherds "for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." He's the only Savior, He's the only one who can help you, He's the only one who can rescue you from your sins and from God because of what your sins deserve. And you have to turn from that sin and put your faith in Him; you have to repent and believe in Him.

And if you're a Christian here this morning let this sink into your soul, please stay with me, think about this: the eternal Son of God loved you so much that He volunteered to become just like you, not for a weekend, not even for 33 years, but forever. There's no way to illustrate that kind of condescension, there's no way to illustrate that kind of love. John Milton described the incarnation in these hauntingly beautiful words that I first read in college and they've never left me. Listen to how Milton describes it:

That glorious Form, that Light unsufferable,  
And that far-beaming blaze of Majesty,  
Wherewith he went at Heav'n's high council-table,  
To sit the midst of Trinal Unity,  
He laid aside, and here with us to be,  
Forsook the courts of everlasting day,  
And chose with us a darksome house of clay.

That's the incarnation. That's what we celebrate at Christmas time. Or in the words of John the Apostle: "The Word became flesh and dwelled among us." No wonder we sing together "Oh come let us adore Him." Let's pray together.

Our Father, as a teacher, I never feel adequate to explain Your truth. This morning a text like this one more so than ever. I pray that your Spirit will do what only He can do, that He will take these timeless, simple words and He would burn them into our souls. Lord may we have a deeper, more profound understanding of the incarnation as a result of our study together, and may that understanding change us, may it grip our souls, may our love for Jesus Christ be greater, may our devotion be stronger, may our commitment to follow Him be more resolute; and Father may our testimony on His behalf be more joyful and more consistent. Father I pray for those who may be here this morning who are not in Christ. Help them to see that there's only one Savior, there's only one who can help them, only one who can rescue them, and may they cry out in repentance and faith to you even now, and find you to be the Savior in and through your Son, in whose name we pray, Amen.