

Finding Hope in the Christmas Story

Luke 2:1-7

December 20, 2020

The story of Christ's birth is so special and so meaningful, and especially, I would say at, in this particular Christmas season, which has seemed, I think, coming out of this year, so bleak and difficult. I don't need to rehearse to all of you what you know about this difficult year. It's enough to say, though, that many people feel like they're limping toward Christmas. I just want to express to those may, who may be watching by livestream because you're not well, you're sick, and overcome with some things of the flesh that we're in, and the disease in, in our land. Just want to tell you that we're praying for you. We love you very, very much.

I know that all of you, here, if you've been at our church for any time you understand this: that our hope is not in better government, it's not in a miracle vaccine, it's not in the reopening of our economy. If this year has taught us anything,

it's that we cannot put our trust, our hope, in anything temporal or earthly, because all of that is passing away. And I think that God wants us to find hope this Christmas in this story, in the meaning of Christmas. So, we want to return again to that story, going back to Luke's gospel in Luke chapter 2, verses 1-7. You can turn there in your Bibles, and we'll look again at what was read to us earlier: the Christ of Christmas, the story of his birth, and the occasion of his birth in Luke 2:1-7.

"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governing Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

There's no, really, hint of sentimentality there in that story, as Luke writes it; just records the facts. There's no fanfare, there's no hype. But it is a faithful narrative of the birth of our Savior. And it's up to us, really, to dig into the text and unpack what's there. And what we're going to see as we do the unpacking and digging is that there are three reasons, we'll summarize it with three reasons for hope in this text. Three reasons that we can find hope this Christmas from this text, and I'm going to give them to you up front. In case you're taking notes, jot this down. We'll come back and unpack them.

Three reasons for hope this Christmas: divine sovereignty, tender providence, and perfect redemption. At a high level, overarching everything, is divine sovereignty. Down in the details, the day to day of where we live, there's a tender providence. And, undergirding it all, and getting to the profound and deepest issues of need is a perfect redemption. Three reasons to find hope in the Christmas story.

So, first point, we find hope in divine sovereignty, divine sovereignty in the Christmas story. What I mean by that is that God sovereignly directs all things in the world; all its people,

high and low, all its plans, everybody's plans, everything. He uses many, many means to accomplish his perfect ends. And that is what we see in these first two verses as God brings his son into the world.

Take a look again at verses 1 and 2, "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governing Syria." With that first opening phrase, as Luke opens using that language, "In those days," Luke has intentionally, there, joined this narrative, here, to what he started, back in Luke 1:5, when he said, "In the days of Herod, king of Judea."

That same phrase, exact same language, it sets the context of Christ's birth in the turbulent days of king Herod, called Herod the Great. This is during the declining years of Herod's reign, and Herod the Great turned into what can only really be described as a terrifying monster of a man. He was ambitious, power hungry, tyrannical. He was suspicious, paranoid. He was in league with Rome, backed by Roman power. He was able to deploy soldiers and spies. All of that blended together as a recipe for a reign of terror. That's what his reign turned into.

At the end of his life, Herod suffered from a disease of the bowels, and some say that that explains his madness and the growing paranoia. It was affecting his brain, affecting his mind. He was anxious about rivals, usurpers, assassins everywhere. So, Herod surrounded himself with bodyguards. He deployed spies throughout the city of Jerusalem to report everything to him, and then he'd send soldiers to arrest, and imprison, and even execute, those who were dissidents, or those whom he suspected of such.

Herod didn't discriminate about who he would kill. He became suspicious of his own wife, Miriam, his favored wife. Becoming suspicious was enough to have her executed. His two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, they also fell under his suspicion, so, so he accused them of high treason and then had them executed as well. Five days before his own death, Herod had his other son, Antipater, killed for suspected involvement in an assassination plot. All this, right before the first Christmas.

Herod's penchant for murder was so well-known that Caesar Augustus once famously said, "It's better to be Herod's dog than one of his children." It was this kind of wicked behavior that God was, even then, sovereignly using. He was directing all things, even those things, even horrendous things, all of them to obey the counsel of his own will. Herod's tyranny and his close collaboration with Rome incited a popular revolt in parts of the area of Judea. There were zealous Jews. They were indignant about Rome's presence in the land at all, about Herod's cooperation with a pagan power in raising taxes for Rome, a pagan power. They were aghast at this.

Two Galilean pharisees, Judas of Galilee, and Matthias, agitated and then led their Galilean disciples to rise up and oppose Herod in some ways. And that agitation eventually led to violence. Some of those disciples destroyed some of Herod's property. They tore down the Roman eagle that he had affixed and fastened to the gate of the temple, attacked Herod's armory, and for their trouble, Herod made an example of them, and he ordered them to be burned alive, along with Judas and Matthias, to leave a lasting impression: Don't cross me.

The reports of growing unrest reached Rome, as Herod's instability started to trouble Caesar Augustus. Herod reigned at Caesar's good pleasure; he was a client king of Rome. He collected Judean taxes and sent them back to Rome. So, Caesar's concern was growing. He was afraid that the unrest in Judea would threaten his tax revenue.

We note, there, in verse 1, Luke 2:1, that all this is happening during a time of a census. Caesar had, in fact, issued a decree that all the world should be registered. This is the third such decree. The first one was earlier in his reign, in 28 B.C., another was in 8 B.C., and this decree was issued in 6 B.C. The census was a tool to register the Roman Empire, not just its citizens, but also the people in the provinces and all the client states. This enabled an orderly administration from Rome. It kept the tax money flowing. And this is what made Caesar Augustus such a successful emperor.

He was born Gaius Octavius, better known as Octavian. He was the great nephew of Julius Caesar, who was the last great general of the Roman Republic. Octavian, after Julius Caesar's assassination, he was, what we'd call in today's language, a

progressive. He'd proven himself in battle, but really, his success came to be known and seen as a bureaucrat, as an administrator. He reformed an outdated, and what many Romans believed was an irrelevant constitution. He effectively ended the Roman Republic, inaugurating a new Roman Empire. And, in 27 B.C., the Senate honored Octavian with the title Augustus. Augustus, meaning revered, venerable. So, from his uncle, Julius, Octavian borrowed the name Caesar, becoming Rome's first emperor, Caesar Augustus.

Caesar Augustus had no interest, really, in the administrative burden of a direct rule of distant lands, distant territories, but he had every interest in taking their money. This is truly taxation without representation. This is Roman rule and the greatness of Rome was really funded by this tax revenue, poured in from the provinces, poured in from client states. Tax collection was enforced by soldiers who extended the iron fist of Rome out throughout the empire. And Caesar used that money to ingratiate himself to powerful people: the Senate in Rome, Roman citizens. He built theaters, built public baths, he funded games, he kept the people entertained, distracted. He once

boasted, "I found Rome built of bricks; I leave her clothed in marble."

The Romans loved him. The Roman Senate loved him. Powerful oligarchs, wealthy people loved him. At his birth, an astrologer cried out, "The ruler of the world is now born!" And his string of successes fed this public perception that he was far more than a mere man. People cried out, "Oh, just and generous lord!" "Lord Caesar." Many hailed him as the savior of the world.

So, back to Judea. Here's Caesar, he's dealing, seeing this growing unrest in Judea. He didn't want to see these tax revenues flowing in from the land threatened due to some unrest, some popular revolt, due to Herod's mismanagement of the land. He was concerned about the cash flow, but more concerned to keep the unrest in Galilee and Judea from spreading any further. Caesar didn't want to depose Herod, as, even though that would seem rational. But he knew that that would risk greater unrest.

Quelling riots and rebellions and unrest is top priority, and, for doing that, Herod was violent enough to get the job done.

So, he left him there. He was also, Herod was, shrewd enough to let the Jews continue their customs and traditions. He, himself was an Idumean, Edomite, mixed breed. And he saw himself as a Jew of Jews, even though he was mixed, of mixed blood. And so, he allowed the Jews to continue in their traditions. And, in Caesar's mind, he's going to, he wants to keep the census going. He wants to see the unrest quelled and dying down. And, to keep the census going amid these tumultuous times in Judea, he needed to provide some oversight, some resistance to Herod's mismanagement. And this man, Quirinius, was his answer.

Caesar sent Quirinius, who was a trusted friend, sent him to Syria, just above the province that Herod ruled. Caesar's relationship with Quirinius went back many, many years. He knew he could trust him to exercise careful oversight, and that's exactly what he did. Quirinius was a wise and decisive man. He took swift measures to pacify the Jews and diffuse the tension in Herod's territory. Quirinius oversaw the census in his own province of Syria, and he, and he ran that census. He conducted the census. But in Judea, he let Herod conduct the census according to the local custom while he stood in the background overseeing it.

If Quirinius had intervened to run the census in Judea, he would have had everyone register in his place of residence, which was according to Roman custom. Herod, though, accommodating Jewish custom, he let the Jews register according to their tribal inheritance. That meant that they had to return to their place of origin, to the territory of their tribe. So, Quirinius had the sense to back off and let Herod conduct the census in a way that placated the Jews and kept things peaceful.

All that to say, amid all of this high, medium, or low level, ground level human plans, human concerns, all the complexities of, of people and wills and concerns and riots and unrest, tax revenue, God is above it all, sovereignly directing all things. He doesn't let things go too far in one case, and he lets things go a little farther in another case, because God is sovereignly directing all things. God is above this scene.

He is directing all human affairs, whether it's Herod's madness, and murderous rampage, whether it's Caesar's money worries, whether it's Quirinius's careful hand of influence, at the

local, regional, and imperial level, it is ultimately not a matter of human will. The only will that matters is God's. His sovereign governance to direct all things to accomplish what he has decreed from before the foundation of the world, that's what matters.

And that's what really gives us hope. As we back off and think about this for our own lives, that's what gives us hope is that there is a sovereign God who's above all things, directing all things according to the counsel of his will. That's what the Bible teaches, and, if we did not believe that, we'd be in a world of hurt, wouldn't we? We'd be anxious, perplexed, confused, worried. This is so important for us to remember, to factor into our day to day thinking, that God is sovereign, and he is in charge.

If we're heading into even more turbulent waters this next year; if a future president of ours abolishes the American republic and inaugurates a new American Empire and installs himself as its new Emperor; if a future governor or magistrate becomes a tyrant and silences dissent by imprisonment or death in our land, and perhaps us seeing divine sovereignty at work in this

Christmas story will help us keep level heads, no matter what hits us. It'll help us have calm hearts, no matter what water we wade into. It'll help us to have hopeful attitudes as we put our faith and trust in God, and in, what he's doing.

So, again, above the confluence of several factors indicated, by Luke, just by sighting names, by sighting times, all of this, again, it has the mark of true history because that's what Luke is recording: true history. And in the confluence of all these different interests, interests of Herod, interests of Caesar, interests of Quirinius, above all of them a sovereign God is directing all things according to the counsel of his own will. "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he wants."

God sovereignly directs all these things to obey the counsel of his will, and that includes this young couple in the text. It's not just at a very, very high level. It's at an intimate, low level as well. Look at verse 3, "...all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and the lineage of

David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child."

Again, if Quirinius had taken over and conducted the census in Judea, you know where Joseph would be? Nazareth; registering in Nazareth. God wanted him in Bethlehem. Why did God want Joseph down there, Joseph and Mary down in Bethlehem of Judea? Because God promised great hope of the Gospel in the prophet Micah. It relied on the coming of a very unique ruler. It says in Micah 5:2, "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days."

On a human level, had Caesar Augustus not decreed, there would be no census, no need to register. Had Herod not provoked Jewish indignation, Caesar wouldn't have sent Quirinius. Had Quirinius taken over the census, Joseph would've been registered in Nazareth. But, in the sovereignty of God, whether it's Caesar, Herod, Quirinius, or even Joseph and Mary, everyone did what God predetermined, did what God decreed. It's God's decree that directs the world, beloved. He directs the will of Caesar. He

directed Quirinius, he directed Herod; all of this to accomplish the sovereign will of God in the birth of his son. It happened precisely this way. It happened when he wanted it to happen, how he wanted it to happen.

Don't be troubled by election results, or questionable results, or whatever they are. Don't be, don't be troubled by anything you see here in our land. Don't be troubled by anything you see in the world. All things are moving sovereignly, according to the sovereign plan of God, marching toward his predetermined end to accomplish all that he has decreed. This happened precisely this way, when, when God wanted it to happen. As Paul said, Galatians 4:4, "...when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son." When the fullness of time had come; not a moment later, not a moment sooner. It happened precisely this way so the birth of Jesus would take place when he wanted it to happen and where he wanted it to happen.

Whatever mess we see at the ground level, God reigns sovereign above. He orders all things according to the counsel of his own will. So, that's the sovereignty of God in the birth of Christ, just a quick look at that. It gives us every reason to abide in

hope, to endure in hope, to keep moving forward, step by step, in faithfulness and righteousness because we have hope in our God, who does all things perfectly.

Second point to see this Christmas: we can find hope in, number two, the tender providence we see in the Christmas story; the tender hand of God's providence in the Christmas story.

We understand this, that the decisions of powerful people made at very high levels, they affect the day to day lives that we live, don't they? Sometimes there are people legislating laws and taxes and things like that that they never have to experience the result of. We do, though. They affect changes in our daily living. All it takes is a virus and we're all reacting, and changing, and adjusting.

Thankfully, that doesn't come around every single month or year. But it happens. All it takes is an election, which happens every four years in our country, for the peaceful transfer of power from one ruler to another, so there aren't bloody coups and assassinations, and all that. There's a peaceful transfer of

power every four years in our country. But we all have to react, and change, and adjust to those things, don't we?

Politics was the immediate reason for the journey of Joseph and Mary, but the sovereign God is the one who directed their steps. Proverbs 16:9 says that, that "The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps." God is sovereign. He does his perfect will. But God, in the midst of that sovereign perfection of his will, outworking of his will, he's also kind. He's considerate, he's thoughtful, attentive to every detail. He accomplishes his will by the tender mercy and ministry of his providence. He gets down into the weeds with us.

So, whether at a very high level, or down at an intimate, low level, where we live, God is there. For Joseph and Mary, whatever's going on at a high level, way above them, they're not privy to any of that. They're just simple, humble people. Joseph, a carpenter, Mary, in her teens. They're not privy to the things happening at Herod's level, Quirinius's level, Caesar's level. They don't have a news feed on their phones, constantly involving them. That's a blessing, isn't it?

But they did see that this order, this decree from Caesar, this registration order, being conducted, census conducted in their own land, this is an occasion to get the very pregnant Mary out of Nazareth before some, her somewhat difficult to explain condition becomes the subject of small-town gossip. But this is no small thing to plan this trip. Leaving Nazareth in the north in a colder time of the year to travel down south, down to Bethlehem in the south, not exactly a convenient trip or convenient timing.

Bethlehem was eighty miles away, or so, from Nazareth, about four to five days on foot in good weather. But here, it's wintertime. Mary's eight months pregnant, so they need to move slowly. That means extended travel time, more discomfort on the road. There's two routes that they could've taken from Nazareth to Bethlehem. The shortest route when straight south through Samaria, but that was also the most rugged route for man and beast; not great for a pregnant wife, bumping along the road.

The longer route did cross over some mountains at first, through Cana to the east, and then descended into the southern shores of Galilee. It involved quite a climb at first, but an animal carrying Mary would bear the difficulty of the ascent and keep it smooth on the way up and the way down. It was a much flatter route, eventually easier going for Mary. It followed a well-worn foot path frequented by travelers going to and from the feasts in Jerusalem. So, after nearly a week on foot, a week or so exposed to cold, tired from the journey, sore from camping on hard ground, Edersheim gives us a sense of the young couple's relief as they approached Bethlehem, at last.

Edersheim writes this, "When, at last, they reached the rich fields that surrounded Bethlehem, a sense of rest and peace must have, almost unconsciously," ca, "crept over the travelers as, passing through the valley, they ascended through the terraced vineyards and gardens. Winter, though it was, the green and silvery foliage of the olive might, even at that season, mingle with the pale pink of the almond, nature's early waker, and, with the," dark, "darker coloring of the opening peach buds. With a sense of relief, the travelers would turn, and through the break of the hills eastward, the heavy, molten surface of

the dead sea would appear. Westward wound the road to Hebron, and behind them lay the valleys and hills which separated Bethlehem from Jerusalem and concealed the Holy City. But, for the present, such thoughts would give way to the pressing necessity of finding shelter and rest." End quote.

The couple is exhausted by this point; weary, hungry, thirsty. But all the way, God has been guiding them by his kind and tender providence, he's been leading them to the very perfect place. Says there, in Luke 2:6-7, that "...while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

Much has been made of that last phrase that there was no place for them in the inn, as though the, the Bethlehemites were inhospitable to this young couple. That's probably not quite right. It's quite likely that Joseph, in his planning and preparation for the journey, he probably made arrangements to stay with a friend or family member there in Bethlehem during that time. But one commentator suggests that this person's guest chamber, that's the word for inn, *Katalyma*, guest chamber; it's

translated, inn, like it's a lodging, a hotel, or something like that, but it's actually a guest room; it's probably occupied when he and Mary arrived. Joseph had to make different accommodations.

But it's Justin Martyr, who wrote in the second century, who most influences our imagination about this scene. He's the reason that we have on our Hallmark cards, Mary, Joseph, all the animals and everything in a cave, or something like that. He writes this, "When the child was born in Bethlehem, since Joseph could not find a lodging in that village, he," took his, "took up his quarters in a certain cave near the village. And, while they were there, Mary brought forth the Christ, and placed him in a manger. And here, the Magi, who came from Arabia, found him." End quote.

That's why our nativity scenes, our songs, Christmas pageants, and all the rest, our traditions, they picture the holy family sleeping in this inhospitable, cold, dank cave, surrounded by barnyard animals, attended by shepherds, and visited by wisemen all at the same time. And we know that the Magi visited them as much as maybe two years later in a rented house; it's a detail

that Justin's obviously mistaken about. So, it's probably time to clear Bethlehem's reputation a little bit, that they do care for travelers and pregnant women out in the cold.

It's commentator James Edwards, he paints a slightly warmer picture for us. He writes this, "The footprint of a typical first-century Palestine dwelling was a rectangle divided into three spaces: a large, central room with a stable for animals on one end, and a guest room," which is the word *Katalyma*, "on the other end." *Katalyma*, the word translated an, inn, there, verse 7, is talking about one of those spaces in the rectangle of the, of the typical home. "All three rooms had separate entrances. The *Katalyma* was an attached guest room separated from the central room by a solid wall. Then the stable was separated from the central room by a half wall, thus allowing the family to feed animals without going outdoors.

"So, when Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem, the guest rooms in the homes were already occupied, and hence, the newborn Jesus was swaddled and placed in a manger." Manger's "within sight, sound, reach of the central room, despite improvised arrangements. Middle Eastern hospitality, then as now, would've

ensured that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were properly cared for.”
End quote.

The evidence that I’ve read and seen squares well with that explanation. And the picture that that provides for us of a large house, the, the *Katalyma* is taken, it’s occupied, but there is a central room, and then a the half wall, with the stable and the animals on the other side, it actually creates a much warmer picture. Reconciles the scene more accurately, accurately, really, with the tender providence of God, that God took care of Joseph and Mary. He tended to their needs. There’s no need to burden them further with imaginative traditions and all that on our part. Mary gave to her firstborn son, yes, in, in humble means and humble circumstances, but it was reasonably comfortable and warm in private accommodations.

So, when Jesus is born, and here’s a, a point of providence that I want you to see most clearly, is how Mary’s motherly instincts immediately kicked into high gear, here. This is another mark of tender providence as God provides for his beloved son, Jesus, in very practical, intimate ways. Two verbs, there, that demonstrate God’s tender providence at work very clearly, verse

7, first Mary swaddled her son, and then second, she laid him in a manger. She wrapped him tightly with cloths and then she put him to bed, she laid him down.

Every mother understands this scene, this picture. Every grandmother cherishes that time to swaddle that newborn baby and put him to bed. Joseph and Mary are here, are relatively comfortable and finding rest after a long journey, they're settled there, in the, in the room, and next to the stable, as the brand-new parents. They are rejoicing, as brand-new parents do, in precious life, priceless moments with their son. They're admiring Jesus' perfectly formed fingers, as all parents do; kiss those perfect cheeks, respond in wonder to every coo and every cry. Like every child, parents wonder at this little creature who's been fearfully, wonderfully made, knit together in his mother's womb.

Before tucking Jesus in for his first outside-the-womb nap, Jesus tells us that Mary swaddled him. That is to say, she bound him tightly in swaddling cloths, wrapped him up. It's one of those details in the nat, in the nativity, it's become so familiar to us we tend to pass it by rather quickly without

thinking too much about it. But we do need to ask: why does Luke tell us this? Why does he provide this little bit of detail? Seems mundane, ordinary. Why the detail about Mary swaddling her son?

You mothers may know more than the rest of us about some of this. But it turns out, as I looked it up, because I'm a dad, so I had to look it up. But swaddling a baby is kind of important, actually. Obviously, swaddling keeps the baby warm for the first few days of life, until his internal thermometer starts to kick in. He's been used to being in the womb, and mom's temperature controls his temperature, and now he's outside, and he's, I mean he's freezing out here. So, swaddling is controlling his temperature.

Swaddling keeps the baby calm. That transition from the tight, closed in, confined environment of a womb to this open, expansive world outside the womb, that's traumatic and upsetting. Swaddling helps with that transition. It keeps the baby calm, used to its environment. Swaddling also helps the baby, keep the baby protected from his own startle reflex. Have you seen that in babies? They startle and they, they jerk. He

doesn't control his own muscular reactions and impulses very well. They're random movements, flailing arms, and those flailing arms can send fingers with those sharp little finger nails jerking toward the face and the eyes, and scratching soft skin, and swaddling prevents that.

Swaddling keeps the baby, all of that, keeps the baby sleeping. Some sources say that swaddling results in a twenty-eight percent reduction in crying due to self-inflicted pain. I don't know how they came up with that percentage, twenty-eight percent, very precise. It's not twenty-eight point two? I, I'm just wondering. But that means a, the warm and calm baby is a baby who sleeps better longer. And when the baby sleeps, momma sleeps. And when momma sleeps, everybody's happy, right?

Swaddling may also help with a baby's growth and development. Some say that immobilizing arms and legs by swaddling helps develop motor skills and even coordination, at that young age. So, all of that warmth, calm, protection, rest, growth, development, it's packed into those two verbs, there, as Luke tells us that Mary swaddled her baby and then laid him to rest in a manger.

This baby, although he's conceived by the miraculous power and intervention of the Holy Spirit, this baby is a human baby in every way. He's human in every way. He's dependent on his mother. He'd die without her. He needs her comfort, her protection, her care, like any other human baby. He's weak, he's vulnerable, he's dependent, he needs to grow. All that is evidence of Jesus' true humanity. He needs his father; his protection, his provision, his preparation for the journey to bring the mother down there, to take care of arrangements, and, and hustle up when the *Katalyma*, the inn, the, the guestroom was not available, to find some other way to care for his family. Little baby Jesus needed that, too.

God's tender care, though, is at work in all these human elements, caring for Jesus the entire way down the trip, taking him in the womb of his mother from Nazareth along the whole journey to Bethlehem. And then it's God, above all these things, who delivered Jesus into the world, maybe not in the guestroom, but, there, in the bigger room and in the stable. God delivered his son into the tender, caring arms of his mother, who wrap, swaddled him, wrapped him, laid him to rest in a manger.

Don't miss the fact that God's tender providence saw to it that Jesus entered into the world by being born into a family; nurturing care of a mother, Mary, as well as the instructing, providing, protecting care of his earthly father, Joseph. This family was essential; provided for his needs, protected him from harm. In fact, it says in Matthew chapter 2, verses 14 and 15 tell us that Joseph had to bundle up that family in a hurry after the visit of the wise men, the Magi. Had to travel to Egypt to escape the murderous search of the wicked king Herod.

He'd been warned by an angel of the Lord in a dream, and so Joseph "rose, took the child and his mother by night, departed to Egypt." He, "remained there until the death of Herod." That's protection from a father. "This," is, "to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'" As Jesus, being the true Israel, pictured coming out of Egypt in a first redemption, pointing to a second, fuller redemption.

God works his great and sovereign purposes at a high, high level, in ways that boggle the mind, in ways that are too great

for us to understand. But he never fails to do his will in, in a tender, and careful, and considerate way, attending to the most intimate of details, conducting us along the path by his kind and considered providence. We need to remember that, don't we? Every day we need to remember that; especially when we're living through troubled times. We can be filled with hope.

And as Christians, we must be filled with hope, knowing that all the big things are directed by his powerful and sovereign hand. We're filled with hope, knowing that all the little things, too, all the small, but very important things to us, very important details of our lives, they're guided in his wisdom by his kind and tender providence. We see that in the Christmas story as well.

So, we find hope in divine sovereignty and tender providence on display in the Christmas story. I had one final point that we can find hope in. Going from the high level down to the low, intimate level, now we go to the deepest spiritual level in this third point. Number three, perfect redemption in the Christmas story. Perfect redemption in the Christmas story.

And, if we didn't add this point, well, it'd just be a story about providence and sovereignty, but, really, where does it impact us eternally? Where does our redemption come? And that's what all these songs we've been singing with such excellent theology, that's what has been unpacked for us this morning already in the reading of Scripture, in the prayers, in, in the singing that we've done. Perfect redemption, that's what is on display in the Christmas story.

We can go many places in Scripture to unpack the theme of God's redemption. In fact, the Bible is a book of God's redemption from beginning to end. From Genesis to Revelation, and everything in between, it's all about God telling about how he's redeeming a people for his own perfect possession to bring glory to him, to, glory to his grace. He gave these people to his son. And his son came, lived a perfect life, died a perfect death for his people to save them from their sins.

All of this redounds to the glory and honor of God as he accepts that sacrifice of his son, he raises him from the dead, he's

ascended into heaven, and bodily he is there, now, ruling and reigning, and he awaits the time when the father will say, Go. Go get your bride. He'll receive the church to himself, and then unfolds all the eschatological realities that are prophesied in Scripture, as God brings everything to its perfect culmination. But it's all about the redemption of God. It's all about God redeeming a people for himself to bring praise to the glory of his grace.

So, we can go pretty much any place in Scripture, you can throw a dart at any page and it's talking about God's redemption. Salvation of God visited Earth here though, in the birth of Jesus Christ. In this text, we really do find all we need to understand the significance of this birth, see the redemption of God. God sovereignly directed all of this. His providence shepherded all of this so that God would accomplish his purpose, Luke 1:77, "...to give," the, "knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins."

But look back, just in Luke 2, in verses 4 and 5. And, notice some crucial details that we passed by rather quickly, there, about a redemptive identity in Jesus. And Luke has skillfully

woven those details into the narrative of the Christmas story. "...Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city," this'll be repeated twice, "of David..." Important detail. He goes "to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem," because, why? "...because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed..." A legal fact, there, he's betrothed. Mary's his wife, so he's legally her husband. And though they haven't, though they have not consummated the marriage in a full marriage ceremony, in consummation, he is betrothed, and he is a legal husband to her. He went there "to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child."

So, he's directed by divine sovereignty, he's guided by divine providence, and this miraculously conceived child is the only one able to fulfill the promises of God to the house of David. He is the only one in all of human history that can provide salvation for God's people. He's the only one that acco, tha, can accomplish perfect redemption. There's nobody else that qualifies.

We could look at this from a lot of different angles, but just what's mentioned here in the text: as the natural son of his mother, Mary, Jesus is the true seed of David. He is genetically connected back to David through his mother, Mary. And yet, because he does not have the father's connection, he does not have the passing of sin nature to him. As the legal son of his legal father, Joseph, Jesus is then the legal heir of David's throne, because Joseph is of the house and the lineage of David. So, he is the legal heir of David's throne, and he is the natural heir of David's throne. But he's also an heir without the transmission of sin. Again, only one qualifies. That's why the virgin birth, the virgin conception, we should say, the virgin conception is so necessary. It avoided the transmission of sin through Joseph.

You don't need to turn there, but in the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7, God said to David, told him this, promised, "When your days are fulfilled," David, "and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever." And then this, "And your house and your kingdom shall

be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever." Your throne: singular pronoun, pronoun of possession, singular possessive pronoun, "your throne, forever." Who can occupy a forever throne? Only a forever person.

In the centuries after David, the possibility that that promise to David, the Davidic Covenant, would ever be fulfilled literally, from a human perspective it seemed utterly and absolutely hopeless. The people of Israel could not see how in the world God could keep the promise that he made to David, since David line had been broken through unfaithfulness, through judgement, through a curse. Except for God, with whom all things are possible, in whom we have hope, that promise could never be fulfilled.

It was to Mary, go back to chapter 1, and verse 26, it's to Mary, who was betrothed to Joseph, that the angel, Gabriel, made the announcement of Jesus' birth, and you can turn back to Luke 1:26 and see that. It says, "In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. He came to her and

said, 'Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!' [She's] greatly troubled at the saying. [She] tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

"And the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

"Mary said to the angel, 'How will this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel," ans, "answered," and said to, "her," the Lor, "'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Most High will overshadow you;" and, Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. Behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' And Mary said, 'Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.' The angel departed from her."

Nothing is impossible with God. An older woman like Elizabeth bearing in her older age, she's in the sixth month of her pregnancy, she who was called barren. Nothing's impossible with God, even when all hope seems to be lost. David's line is gone. There's a curse on David's line in one generation, the curse of Jeconiah. How can God fulfill it? With God there is a way, according to his will. Nothing is impossible with God. That is a truth we need to hear this Christmas, isn't it? We have every reason for hope, why? Because, without figuring out a, all the details, we have every reason for hope because God is God. God is God. He always accomplishes everything he sets out to do, and every promise of his, will be fulfilled.

Just to show you this a little bit, turn in your Bibles to the book of Micah. Go back to the book of Micah so you can see where this prophecy of his birth in Bethlehem, Micah 5:2, where this originated, some of its surrounding context, as well. Because that's what's really interesting, is this surrounding context. Micah 5:2 says, "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah," you're, "too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth

for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days."

Now, the ESV says, "from ancient days," but, it's actually the word *olam*. And other translations, I think, get this more accurately when they render that *olam* "from eternity." His coming forth is from old, comma, from eternity. In other words, this is no mere human ruler. There's something unique and special about him. This ruler has a divine nature. He shares an eternity. He's from before time began. He's from eternity, which means he is eternal, and eternality is a, an attribute of deity.

It's absolutely critical that God accomplish his sovereign will, that his providence conduct the family, the young family from Nazareth to Bethlehem in time for the birth of Jesus, because everyone needed to turn their attention to Micah's prophecy and do a little reading, which is what we're going to do. For those who didn't stop at Micah 5:2 in that day, like king Herod, when he discerned from his scholars the birthplace of the Messiah, he stopped at Micah 5:2, didn't go any further, didn't read any context. If we keep on reading, if we take an interest in the context of Mic, Micah's prophecy, this is what we'd see.

Notice God's standard of righteousness, there, in Micah 6:6-8, "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" He's, "told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Hmm. Doing justice, that's external conformity to the law of God. That's doing what is good, and what, speaking what is good and right with our lips, doing what is good and right in our behavior. That's on the outside. That's what everybody can see; whether or not we are conforming externally to the righteousness revealed in the law of God.

But it goes internal. "To love kindness," that is to have a heart of good toward our fellow man; toward God and our fellow man. "To walk humbly with our God," that's to live in submission

to him. It's to live in obedience to God's revealed Word. And these are matters of, of internal conformity to what is good; a righteousness that is internal, that comes from the heart, and comes out to the outside in a way that everybody can see.

Well, that's the standard. What's to be done about it? Because we can't give offerings and burnt offerings and sacrifices, and, and thousands of rivers of oil, which is costly. We don't have enough money to provide for this, in fact, we can't even give what is precious and dear to us, like "the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul." So, what's to be done? Look at Micah chapter 7, verses 7-9, and see that the heart of faith doesn't look to itself, it looks to the salvation in God.

"But as for me, I will look to the Lord; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me. Rejoice not over me, my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me. I will bear the indignation of the Lord because," I've, "sinned against him, until he pleads my cause and executes judgment for me. He will bring me out to the light; I shall look upon his vindication."

I'm not fond of that word, vindication, in the ESV. It's the word *setika*, which should be translated, righteousness, here. And he's saying, I shall look upon his righteousness. He's not just looking for vindication for himself. He knows that he bears the indignation of the Lord, justly so, because, verse 9, "I have sinned against him." But he waits in hope. He knows that it must be God. God, who does act as the omniscient prosecutor, taking him to court, taking him before law, having him stand before God, who is the righteous judge. If he has any hope of acquittal, any hope of justification, God the prosecutor must turn around and become to him God the advocate. That's what he longs for, there.

God must plead my cause. He must execute judgement not against me, but for me. And then, and only then, shall I look upon his righteousness, a righteousness that is not my own, but a righteousness that is one that comes from God on the basis of faith. It's an external righteousness, what the reformers called an alien righteousness. Alien, because it's outside of us. It's strange, it's foreign to us, it's a righteousness we so desperately need because none of us have it. But God has it. God

is righteous. And I, with his advocacy for me, I shall look upon his righteousness. And then God can be both "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus," Romans 3:26. When that happens, and precisely because of God's saving work through this promised child, the prophet can rejoice. He finds hope.

Look at, end of that chapter, chapter 7, Micah 7:18-19. "Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea." What's he talking about? Expiation. Separating the sinner from his sin so that the sinner is no longer called a sinner, but called a saint, because his sins are gone, cast from him, separated from him.

Well, how can God do that? How can God, who is a perfectly just judge, how can he pardon our sin and still be considered in any way just? If you go before a judge, plead a grievance before him; someone committed a crime, broke into your house, stole all your stuff, killed your dog, killed your cat, whatever; you go

before the judge, they've caught him, you had him on camera, you catch him and you go before the judge and the judge says, I know this guy, coached him in little league. Let's let him go. He's a pretty good dude. This is a, this was an anomaly in his life." You would cry injustice, and rightly so.

We expect a perfectly just judge to be perfectly just, to not let one sin go, to not cast any sin into the depths of the sea. I mean, why would we expect God to do this? How can he pass over transgression for anyone? Still be considered righteous. Isn't that the height of unrighteousness, to pass over transgression? The answer comes in the substitutionary atonement of the sin-bearing Christ, the child born in Bethlehem.

Turn back to Luke chapter 2. We're going to look at one more detail, here. Verse 7, we already noted that after Jesus was born, we saw that Mary, she wrapped him, let me get there myself, she wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger. Notice the elements, there. She wrapped him in bands of cloth, laid him in a manger. Jesus is helpless there, a vulnerable human baby. Subject to the care of his mother, he is dependent upon her to take care of a body that he had no real

power or control over. He's wrapped in bands of cloth, laid in a manger; four things there.

We find him in that same condition at the end of Luke's Gospel. Turn to the end and look at Luke 23. End of the chapter of Luke 23, in verse 53. Jesus has been crucified. He's been put to death on the cross. He called out with a loud voice, committed his spirit into the hands of his father, and then, he, by his own decision, gave up his breath. He chose the very moment that he would die. And after Jesus died, Luke tells us that Joseph of Arimathea, he was a member of the Sanhedrin, secretly though for fear of the Jews, but he came and became a bold believer; he asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Pilate consented. So, Joseph went up to Golgotha, records this, Luke 23:50 and following, went up to Golgotha, the hill, took down the body off the cross in order to prepare it for burial.

Once again, you see that the body of Jesus is there, dependent, in a helpless condition. And it says there, verse 53, "He took it down, wrapped it in a linen shroud, laid him in a tomb cut in stone." Again, his body wrapped in linen, laid, this time, not in a manger, but in a tomb. Those two verses, Luke 2:7, Luke

23:53, exactly parallel. First, it's a capable mother, and then a capable man. First, it's the careful attention of a tender mother, and then it's the careful attention of a loyal man. Both of them wrapping his helpless body in linen, both of them confining that body in swaddling cloth, both of them doing so in order to lay his body to rest.

How can God, the perfectly just judge, how can he pardon sin and remain just? How can God pass over transgression, still be considered righteous? Because this baby, son of Mary, son of God, because this one who's coming forth is from old, from eternity, because this perfect one who always does what is good, both externally doing justice, always doing what is right, and internally loving kindness, walking humbly before his God, this one who is perfect, sinless, flawless, the spotless lamb of God, this one gave his life as an atonement for our sins, that whoever believes should not perish but have everlasting life.

At his birth, Jesus was laid in a manger, a newborn baby, tender life; that's God's gift of a miraculous life, God's gift of a savior. At his death, Jesus was laid in a tomb, a dead body, lifeless and cold, which is God's gift of an atoning substitute,

a sacrifice for our sins. Why did he die? "God made him who knew no sin," 2 Corinthians 5:21, "to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

Such hope we find in the Christmas story. The high level, cosmic level of God's sovereignty, at the near and imminent level of the lives that we live every single day, we find hope there, too. But most of all we find hope in the perfect redemption of our God, who loves us, and gave up his son for us, that we might live for him. That's what we get to rejoice this, in this Christmas and find hope in this Christmas. Let's pray.

Our God, our minds are overwhelmed with the evidence of your eternal, infinite wisdom, by which you plan all things and order all things according to the counsel of your will. We're amazed as we see the marks of your tender providence as you get into the details and get into the day-to-day life of ordinary human beings, care for us in such intimate ways, and you direct all things in such powerful ways. But, for us who have repented of our sins and put our faith in Jesus Christ, we see the greatest reason for hope this Christmas in the Christmas story is that

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baby who was born, the incarnate son of God. This mystery of all mysteries unveiled, God in flesh, God with us, the Immanuel.

Father, thank you for your kindness to us in Christ. Thank you for the Christmas message. Thank you for the reasons that we can find joy and hope and rejoice with one another this Christmas season to sing songs of praise and thanksgiving to you, and to sit around tables in homes that you've provided for us with food that you've given us to enjoy fellowship and company around the table, all because you have given us salvation in Christ. We love you, and what could we say but thank you? And what could we do but offer our lives to you, that you might fulfill all righteousness in us because of Christ. It's in his name we pray, Amen.