

# How to Make Sense of the Christmas Rush

Luke 2:1-20

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 18 December 2005

## Introduction

Have you finished your Christmas shopping? Lorraine and I did ours yesterday morning. It was crazy. In fact, this whole time of year is crazy. We rush around buying presents. We rush from one end-of-year Christmas function to the next. We rush around trying to finish jobs and tie up all the loose ends at work before the holidays. And even the holidays – even Christmas Day itself – sees many people rushing about, making the journey from lunch with one side of the family to dinner with another set of relatives. No wonder we talk about “the Christmas rush.” Well guess what. That very first Christmas was no different. Everyone was rushing about. We read earlier Luke’s account of the Christmas story. Did you notice that it consists, essentially, of three journeys. Three rushed, almost frantic journeys.

## Joseph and Mary’s journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem (1-7)

The first is Joseph and Mary’s journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Luke starts with these words, “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.” Now, in those days, Caesar Augustus was the most powerful man in the world. He ruled an empire the likes of which had never before been seen. From England in the north, to Asia in the east, to Africa in the south, it covered more territory than mainland USA. Three million square miles. He ruled the entire known world. He was powerful and he was dangerous. When he was only sixteen, the Roman orator Cicero said of him, “He’s a talented young man who should be praised, honoured, and eliminated.” But one by one he eliminated all his enemies until, in 27BC, he was recognised as the sole leader of the Roman world and named Caesar Augustus. We still talk about someone who is an “august” person if they are revered and honoured. Caesar certainly was. The month of August was named after him. Statues were built in his honour. Here’s a couple on the screen. By the end of his life people worshipped him. This is what the Myrian Inscription says about him: “Divine Augustus Caesar, Son of God, Imperator of land and sea, the Benefactor and Saviour of the whole world.” He was worshipped as the Saviour of the world. After one hundred years of civil war, he had brought peace to the Roman world. The *Pax Romana* or Roman peace. It was a bloody kind of peace. Lots of people died to create and maintain it. At one point it took a standing army of 500,000 soldiers, which costs a lot of money.

So one day Caesar had an idea. To raise more taxes he issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. “And everyone,” Luke says, “went to their own town to register.” This absolute monarch lifts his finger in Rome, and the whole world scrambles to obey. Fifteen hundred miles away, in an obscure province of the empire, a poverty-stricken young couple – the young woman heavily pregnant – make a difficult and hazardous 90 mile journey to a little town called Bethlehem. A little town that just happens to be the town mentioned in an ancient Hebrew prophecy (Micah 5:2-5).

<sup>2</sup> “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
though you are small among the clans of Judah,  
out of you will come for me  
one who will be ruler over Israel,  
whose origins are from of old,  
from ancient times” ...

<sup>4</sup> He will stand and shepherd his flock  
in the strength of the LORD,  
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.  
And they will live securely, for then his greatness  
will reach to the ends of the earth.

<sup>5</sup> And he will be their peace.

Notice that the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem. But Joseph and Mary don't live in Bethlehem. They wouldn't have been in Bethlehem when Jesus was born except for Caesar and his decree. So do you see the point that Luke is making? Who is the real king in this story? Who really rules the world? Caesar may think he's on the throne, but God is really in charge. He uses Caesar's decree to move Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem, in order that this prophecy might be fulfilled, in order that his purposes might be achieved. The implication is that if God can do this – if he can make Caesar Augustus unwittingly serve his own purposes – then nothing and no one is beyond the reach of his power.

That's what an insurance salesman called Bob discovered. He had just started following Jesus and he met up with his friend, Doug, who was also Christian. Doug told him about that promise in the Bible where Jesus says, "Ask whatever you will in my name – according to my expressed will – and you'll receive it." So Bob says, "Great. I'm going to start praying for something. I think I'll pray for Africa." Doug says, "That's kind of a broad target. Why don't you narrow it down to a specific country?" "All right. I'll pray for Kenya." Doug challenged Bob to pray every day for six months for Kenya. If he did that and nothing extraordinary happened, Doug would pay him five hundred dollars. But if Bob didn't pray every day, the whole deal was off.

Bob began to pray. And for a long while nothing happened. Then one night at a dinner function he happened to bump into a woman who helped run an orphanage in Kenya. He pounded her relentlessly with questions about the country. Eventually, she invited Bob to visit Kenya and tour the orphanage. When Bob arrived, he was appalled by the poverty and basic health care. So, upon returning home, he began writing to pharmaceutical companies, describing the vast needs he had seen and reminding them that every year they throw away large amounts of unsold medical supplies. "Why not send them to Kenya?" Some of them did. The orphanage received more than a million dollars' worth of medical supplies, and invited Bob back for a celebration, to which the president of Kenya was also invited. They got talking. The president offered to take him on a tour of Nairobi. In the course of the tour they saw a prison. Bob asked about a particular group of prisoners. "Who are they?" "They're political prisoners," he was told. "That's a bad idea," Bob said, "You should let them out." Back home Bob received a phone call from the State Department of the United States Government. "Is this Bob?" "Yes." "Were you recently in Kenya?" "Yes." "Did you make any statements to the president about political prisoners?" "Yes." The State Department official explained that the Department had been working for years to get the release of these prisoners, to no avail. But then the prisoners had been released, and they were told it had been largely because of ... Bob. Several months later the president of Kenya telephoned Bob and explained that he was selecting a new cabinet. Would Bob be willing to fly over and pray for him for three days while he worked on this very important task?

What are you praying for? Who are you praying for? This Christmas, in the midst of all your rushing about, remember that nothing and no one is beyond the reach of God's power. Not the president of Kenya. Not the emperor of Rome. Not your unbelieving friends. Nothing.

### **The angels' journey from heaven to earth (8-14)**

In verses 8-14 Luke records a second journey: angels travel from heaven to earth to announce this news. Verse 10: "I bring you good news [or good tidings] of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ, the Lord." Verse 14: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests." It's interesting. Compare this announcement with the words that were used to describe the birth of Caesar Augustus: "The birthday of the god [Caesar] marked for the world [for all people] the beginning of good tidings [good news]" because he turned out to be a "saviour who put an end to war." He brought peace on earth. Luke is deliberately comparing Jesus to Augustus. Jesus, he says, is the real Saviour. Jesus is the One who can bring real peace. Jesus is the One who displays the glory of God.

What do you understand by glory? In our world, glory is something we celebrate on a magazine cover. It's strength or beauty, wealth or success. Listen to this. It's an ad from the "Personal" section of *New York* magazine, placed by a woman who wants to meet a man as remarkable as her:

*"Strikingly beautiful* – Ivy League graduate. Playful, passionate, perceptive, elegant, bright, articulate, original in mind, unique in spirit. I possess a rare balance of beauty and depth, sophistication and earthiness, seriousness and a love of fun. Professionally successful, perfectly capable of being self-sufficient and independent, but I won't be truly content until we find each other. Please reply with a substantial letter describing your background and who you are. Photo essential."

I can imagine it would be hard to possess "a rare balance of beauty and depth" and not want to let others know about it. This is a profile of glory as we understand it from a human perspective. So when you think about God coming to earth to let us know what he's like, to reveal his glory, how would you envisage him coming? Luke's readers were expecting some kind of powerful, all-conquering king in the mould of Caesar Augustus. Some kind of celestial superhero. What do the angels announce? Verse 12: "You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." You will find the God of the universe confined in the tiny body of a human baby. The God who spoke the Milky Way into existence unable to speak, or walk, or feed himself. Strange kind of glory. But when you think about it, maybe it's not that strange. Maybe the most glorious aspect of God is not his power and majesty, as great as they may be. Maybe the most glorious aspect of God is that he would lay aside his power and majesty. That he, the King of Heaven, would take on our suffering and our sin, and live with us, die for us – for me, for you – to give us life.

The Christmas story reminds me of the story of Father Damien, a priest who became famous for his willingness to serve lepers on the island of Molokai in Hawaii. It was an island that had been quarantined to serve as a leper colony. For sixteen years he lived among the lepers of that island. He learned to speak their language. He bandaged their wounds, embraced the bodies no one else would touch. He organised schools, bands, choirs. He built homes so that the lepers could have shelter. He built two thousand coffins by hand so that when they died, they could be buried with dignity. Slowly, it was said, Molokai became a place to live, rather than a place to die. Father Damien was not careful about keeping his distance. He dipped his fingers in the poi bowl along with his patients. He shared his pipe. He got close. For this the people loved him. But one day he stood up and began his sermon with two words: "We lepers." Now he wasn't just helping them. Now he was one of them. He wasn't just on their island. He was in their skin. He had chosen to live as they lived; now he would die as they died. When God came to earth to reveal his glory he began his message, "We lepers..." Now he wasn't just helping us. Now he was one of us. He was in our skin. That's why armies of angels made the journey from heaven to earth on Christmas Day. To proclaim that message. In the midst of the Christmas rush, it's a message worth hearing, a message worth responding to.

### **The shepherds' journey from the field to the manger (15-20)**

In this passage, Luke explains how to respond. He recounts one more journey, the shepherds' journey. Verse 15: "When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.' So they hurried off (some translations say they ran off or rushed off – this is the first Christmas rush!) and (after a search) found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger." Shepherds in those days had such a reputation for being unclean and immoral that they were restricted, along with the Gentiles and the godless, to the outer courtyards of the temple. They weren't even allowed to testify in a court of law. But Luke upholds these illiterate peasants as examples for us. They rush to Bethlehem to investigate the angels' claims. If the message of Christmas is true, it's worth

taking the time and effort to investigate, to study the evidence, and make an informed decision on whether or not Jesus really is the Son of God, the Saviour of the world.

But Luke goes on in verse 17 to say that when the shepherds had seen Jesus, “they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.” These shepherds became the first witnesses to the truth of Christmas. They simply passed on what they had seen and heard. This Christmas, in the midst of our rushing about, let’s not lose sight of the fact that we also can be witnesses to the truth about Christmas. As we journey through this week, we’ll have opportunities every day to share what we have seen and heard of Jesus. It may be at a busy Westfield mall, giving up a car park for some irate driver. It may be across the backyard fence, inviting someone to our Christmas Eve service. It may be in that corner of this church after the service, praying for a seeking friend or loved one. It may be looking across the dinner table on Christmas day, and telling someone you love them. Because the truth lying behind the first Christmas rush is that God is in charge – nothing and no one is beyond his power. But as powerful as he is, he was willing to lay aside everything to reach you, and those you love. That’s a message worth celebrating this Christmas.

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