

The wonder of Christ's birth at the time of Augustus' registration

Rev. J. Driessen – Luke 2:1-7

Sing: Song of Zacharias: 1,2,6,7

Read: Luke 2:1-12

Sing: Psalter 261

Sing: Psalter 292:1, 5

Sing: Psalter 238: 2, 3

Congregation, the portion of Scripture on which we wish to meditate this Christmas Day can be found in Luke 2 verses 1 through 7:

¹ *And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.*

² *(And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)*

³ *And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.*

⁴ *And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)*

⁵ *To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.*

⁶ *And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.*

⁷ *And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.*

Congregation, we wish to consider the Christmas message contained in the first seven verses of Luke 2. We will focus especially on the wonder of Christ's birth during the enumeration of the society of that time. In Luke 2, we read about two kings, but what a contrast between the two! On the one hand, we can envision the emperor in a magnificent palace, and, in contrast, we see the King of kings lying in an animals' manger.

We can also see a stark contrast between the people of these kings. The emperor's people are tense, restless and fearful, while the people of the King of kings are a happy and blessed people.

However, the beginning of this Christmas story is not entirely happy and blessed, and not very quiet and peaceful. As we look closely at Luke 2, we will notice that the first verses of

this chapter do not portray a romantic or peaceful scene. There is no evidence at all of a “silent and holy night”; neither was there “peace on earth.” At most, the so-called “peace” in the Roman Empire was essentially cruel slavery and oppression. As a matter of fact, when we read what it actually says in Luke 2, with our romantic impressions removed, we can recognize the hectic and driven lifestyle which is so similar to today’s society. The roads in Israel were overcrowded and the people were hurriedly travelling in all directions. It probably looked like a mass migration was underway as they moved from east to west and from north to south. The inns and roadways were all full beyond capacity. If this were in our time, we would describe it as a very busy Christmas rush with traffic jams and people everywhere.

Why were all these people on the road to begin with? What drove them? Why all the hurry and unrest? What was the cause of all this commotion? Actually, it would be better to ask: *who* was the cause of all this? It appears that the Roman Caesar was behind it, the great ruler of that time, as we read in the first verse: “*And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from **Caesar Augustus** that all the world should be taxed.*” August, the Exalted Caesar, considered himself to be God. He enjoyed being called names such as: Divus Augustus, the divine Augustus, the shepherd of the nations, the son of God, the saviour and the redeemer, just to name a few. Even the inscription on Roman coinage referred to him as such.

However, this self-professed “shepherd of the nations” was not a true shepherd; in fact, he was really a greedy and selfish dictator. What he craved was to have all the power, glory and wealth for himself and, for that egocentric reason, he uprooted his sheep across the entire Roman Empire. This is clear in verse 3: “*And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.*” Here we picture a panicked flock of sheep who are pushing and shoving and almost trampling each other underfoot. The shepherd does not lead them, but instead he lashes out at them and relentlessly drives them on.

“*And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.*” Why was there this taxation, the census? Was it because the emperor’s revenue agency wanted to register all of the people, in order to be able to levy more taxes and to exploit the people? Was it for the consolidation of the emperor’s power so that he could wield more control? Or perhaps it was to boast in the great multitude of his subjects, as Scripture says in Proverbs 14:28, “*In the multitude of people is the king’s honour*”?

We do not know what the exact reason was. However, this we *do* know: with this taxation, Caesar Augustus wanted to have all of the power and adulation. He wanted to exploit the people to the greatest extent possible. As such, he was an evil ruler, of which we still have so many in our time who willingly cause unspeakable suffering and misery in this world.

“And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.”

Luke the Evangelist depicts Joseph and Mary as normal people, without any divine radiance or any particular impressiveness. Notice that in the first verses of Luke 2, there is not a word about the supernatural or the divine in all that is happening. After Gabriel had brought his extraordinary message and after Zacharias and Mary had sung their spiritual songs in the time of Advent, a remarkably sober and simple account of Christmas follows. It is very human.

We read: *“And Joseph also went up.”* He had to; no one had any choice. When this powerful distant emperor in Rome said: “Come!” he had to come. Or: ‘Go!’he had to go. If the whole world was being taxed, why would a simple carpenter from Nazareth be excluded? After all, he was only a lowly, insignificant citizen in the scheme of things. He was not important and no one worried about his and especially Mary’s circumstances. The authorities couldn’t care less: the high and mighty men had much bigger issues to contend with than to be concerned with a Joseph and Mary from a remote little village called Nazareth in the hinterland of Galilee.

So Joseph was forced to walk the long journey from Nazareth all the way to Bethlehem, a distance of about 170 kilometres, on dusty, rough roads. For Joseph, that was not the worst of it. He also had to bring Mary, his pregnant fiancé, with him. He could not just leave Mary in Nazareth because she was at the end of her pregnancy and the birth of their child was imminent. The decree of the emperor was an unyielding law that applied to them, even though they were members of the old royal lineage of David. Indeed, they were of royal descent but the glory of King David had completely dissipated. The prophet Amos had already spoken of the fallen tabernacle of David. And so; accordingly, Joseph and Mary did not resemble a prince and princess in any way.

“And Joseph also went up.” No exception was made for him or Mary. Joseph was a servant of Rome and bound to obey the decree of the mighty emperor. How humiliating this decree of Caesar Augustus must have been for the people of Israel, especially if we think of what his intentions were. In those days, the splendour and opulence of the great Roman Empire was blinding as it stretched from the east to the west.

However, behind all this splendour, the dark shadows and woeful misery of this great empire were noticeable. This census made the emperor immensely rich, but only at a high cost to the people, who were plunged into miserable poverty. No, Augustus did not organize this census for God’s honour, nor did he consider the King of kings. A census in that sense would have brought redemption to the world. But it is not redemption that the world received from this monarch. No, quite the opposite, and that at a time when the people expected to receive goodness and blessings from him. They were hoping that he would deliver them instead from their deteriorating society.

Indeed, the world of those days was spiritually destitute and morally bankrupt. The people sat in darkness and in the shadow of death. The world was thirsting for light and

crying for deliverance. Everyone's eyes were on the mighty ruler in Rome, on him who would bring deliverance in their deep distress. But what did the divine Augustus give to the groaning world? He did not give, but he took! He did not give anything, but said to the world, “You are to enrich me!” He did not bring salvation to a world, lost in sin and guilt; instead he took from what little they had left. With the census, he took solely for himself and sought to increase his power and wealth.

As an added abuse, the people of Israel, the people from whom the Christ would be born, had to register themselves as well. The people of Israel are not even mentioned separately here; there is no distinction between them and the rest of the world. In the Christmas narrative, Israel is only mentioned as part of the Syrian colony of which Cyrenius was governor. Oh, how oppressively dark is the beginning of the Christmas account! Would the work of salvation which God had promised to the forefathers ever come to pass? Where was the fulfillment of God’s promise? Had Jacob not said, *“The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come and unto him shall the gathering of the people be”* (Genesis 49:10)?

Sadly, the reality was that an Edomite, King Herod, was now on the throne of Judah. Would God’s promise fail forevermore? Certainly not! God’s council will stand and He will cause all things to work together to the fulfillment of His will: a rod shall come forth out of the stem of Jesse. It seems that the emperor is the all-powerful one in this portion of Scripture, but Luke sees it all in a different light, in a higher light. Even though Caesar Augustus calls himself the exalted one, he is not! Although people sacrifice to him, he is not God! The Lord alone is the Most High and the Supreme Ruler! He appointed Bethlehem as the town in which the Bread of Life would be laid down. In this way, Bethlehem would truly be what its’ name means, “House of Bread.” He who is the Lord rules the earth. He leads all things so that His council will stand and His good pleasure will be fulfilled. This is what the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem testifies of.

“And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.” That night, oh, what a wonder: God’s Son was born! *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life”* (John 3:16). The Lord gave! While Augustus organized a census and took away, the Lord, according to His council, gave to the world! After centuries of patient suffering, He satisfied His hungry people. He gave His Son, the highest and best gift. He gave everything. The good pleasure of God was being fulfilled. The Lord had compassion on His people and He had mercy on a world which was not interested in Him, a world which only marvelled at the glory and power of Caesar Augustus. But, I say it with reverence, God laughs at Augustus: Who? Augustus? The ultimate good? Augustus? The saviour of this world? No, He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh. Augustus is long since dead and buried. His power is gone; his throne empty and forgotten!

But God continues to seek sinners, those who are under the judgment of God and in a state of awful misery in which sin has brought them. If God takes a census, if He gathers their information, then surely He finds an irretrievably lost world. He finds people that can only be saved if He saves them. This is true: God is not a God who takes away. Taking away is what people do, people who want to be equal to God. Taking away is what we do: we have robbed Him of His honour and we are so unutterably audacious that we even took His Son and nailed Him to the cross. But God, although He knew all this, still is a God who gives. He gave His only begotten Son, the One that He loved, as a sacrifice to save lost sinners. What an unspeakable gift! *“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth”* (John 1:14).

He gave. Where there was no way anymore, God Himself provided a way of salvation: He sent His Son in the likeness of our sinful flesh. God the Father gave. And Christ also gave: He gave Himself to make poor people rich. The thought of selfishly enriching Himself does not even cross His mind. *“For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich”* (2 Corinthians 8:9). He gave Himself to redeem the needy. He gave Himself to satisfy the hungry and to comfort those who mourn. He gave Himself to give strength to the weary. He gave Himself to seek and to save that which is lost. He is a God who gives.

Just as Augustus registered the citizens of his empire, so, in a way, the Lord registers the citizens of His Kingdom. However, unlike the sinful registration of Augustus, God’s registration, as the Bible tells us, is holy and originating in heaven. He too counts: He registers His people, the true Church. He has been doing that already from eternity. From before the foundation of the world, He writes in the book of life of the Lamb. In His eternal good pleasure, He registered them through election. As the Saviour has said, their names are written in heaven. They come out of every kindred and tongue and people and nation, and have their names written on the scrolls of His heavenly Kingdom as they are born again and converted unto God. It is important to notice that, in his registering, God maintains justice because registration can only take place on the condition that atonement has been made, that the atoning sacrifice is offered and that the debt is paid.

Who will be able to make atonement for sin? Who shall offer that sacrifice? We cannot do it! Our sacrifices do not even come close to satisfying the Lord’s demands. Therefore what a wonder it is that in eternity there was that Council of Peace, in which God the Father asked: *“For who is this that engaged his heart to approach unto me?”* (Jeremiah 30:21) Then we hear God the Son answer: *“Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of Me”* (Psalm 40:7).

This is the gospel of Bethlehem: the Mediator between God and man came because in the volume of the book is written of Him. His name is in it – the name of Him who would give Himself over to death, who would offer the sacrifice of atonement, who would satisfy

God’s justice and who would pay the full debt. God could now register His Church because Christ gave Himself to be the Surety already from eternity.

Because of Him, God will gather His people out of every kindred, tongue, people and nation. See then, congregation, how the glory and wisdom of God radiates with so much more splendour than all the glory of man. While a decree went out from Caesar Augustus in Rome, that all the world should be taxed for his own profit, the decree when out from Bethlehem to have the whole world registered for the King of kings.

And they will come, every one from his own town and place, to sit down with all of God’s children in His kingdom because His people do not only come from Israel. True, the Israeli shepherds were the first ones to kneel at the manger in Bethlehem. We could say that the church in the fields of Ephratah was the first to be included in the divine registration. But God did not stop there: His registration covers a far greater area than that covered by Caesar Augustus because the whole earth belongs to Him. *“The earth is the LORD’S, and the fullness thereof”* (Psalm 24:1). Out of every kindred, and tongue, and people and nation, He causes sinners to come to Him. They come with weeping and supplication to Zion’s King and He counts them all. Soon, the wise men from the east followed the shepherds. The poet’s word was fulfilled: *“I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon to them that know me: behold Philistia, and Tyre, with Ethiopia; this [man] was born there. And of Zion it shall be said, This and that man was born in her: and the highest himself shall establish her. The LORD shall count, when he writeth up the people, [that] this [man] was born there”* (Psalm 87:4-6).

The Lord registers and gives! We can see this so clearly confirmed in the Gospel message of Luke 2. *“And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. 7 And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn”* (Luke 2:6, 7).

Mary’s days were accomplished. How wondrous the past few months had been for her, after the angel Gabriel had so suddenly appeared to her and had announced the birth of the promised Saviour. How great a privilege it was for her to become the mother of the Lord!

At the same time, she had been regarded with much suspicion in the eyes of the other village people. Even Joseph had wanted to leave her secretly at first. And who knows how many in Nazareth had looked at her with distain on their faces?

God’s ways always bring a cross to bear, as we can see also in Mary’s life as the mother of the Lord. For Mary it meant that she had to depend on the Lord and to deny herself. Finally, after a long and, especially for Mary, tiresome journey, they arrived in Bethlehem. Although it was their hometown, there was no one who wanted to take them in. They inquired at the inn, but there was no room for them there either. Nobody showed any compassion towards this mother who was about to give birth.

The Lord, though, provided room for them in a humble stable. In that lowly place the Son of God was born. There was no room for Him who had the heavens for His throne, except

among the animals. He, who is God of God and Light of Light, was laid in an animals’ feeding trough. What deep humiliation! His first humiliation was so immensely deep that we cannot even fathom it. *“Because there was no room for them in the inn.”* There was no room for the Son of God in Bethlehem so that room could be made for the Lord in the hearts of sinners.

How necessary that is, congregation, because by nature the exalted Augustus is on the throne of our hearts. In your heart and in mine, we say by nature, “I am king and no one else; I will rule.” Our little kingdoms must be brought to ruin and our heart, which is too proud to allow for salvation by grace, needs to be humbled into the dust. This humbling is particularly the work of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit which Jesus would acquire through His works of humiliation. The Spirit claims our kingdom for the King of Bethlehem. However, that means that our crowns need to be removed, which we resist with all our strength and soul. Nevertheless, in spite of all our resistance, at the day of God’s power we will be dethroned and our kingdom will be overthrown. Just as king Belshazzar was confronted with the testimony of the Word of the Lord regarding his life, so also are we “weighted, weighted, found wanting.”

Sin, which previously was sweet to us, then becomes bitter and repulsive. Oh, then you will learn that everything outside this gift of God in the manger is death. Then we learn that, outside of Him, we are miserable, wretched people. It is then that the same Spirit who teaches us what it means to have sinned against a good-doing God, also begins to glorify Christ. Nothing remains of us, other than a doomed, cursed and unworthy sinner; a sinner who begins to confess: “I am evil, born in sin; Thou desirest truth within.”

Yet, by His grace, the King in the manger wants to show mercy to such wretched sinners. That same Spirit who first opened your eyes to your evil heart and to God’s justice now also opens your eyes to see the Saviour of sinners. This Saviour who was laid in the manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes, all evidence of His deep humiliation. Indeed, the Spirit makes the King to be born in the heart; at that moment, the eye is opened to the astounding possibility that even the greatest of the sinners can yet be saved. Oh, seeing something of this will cause us, along with Paul, to *“count all loss and dung for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ”* (Philippians 3:8).

Then there is that strong desire to be found in Him through faith and to be a partaker of the righteousness He has merited. This longing only becomes stronger when we experience more and more that everything falls short from our side. All of the pious offerings that we think will please the Lord and all our legalistic works – everything falls short of the mark.

It is then that we may feel as Isaiah describes: *“O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted”* (Isaiah 54:11). To these people, I must say, stop looking for that which cannot help you and which cannot bring you salvation. Here He lies in the manger; He who is full of grace and truth and in whom alone is your life and your salvation. And the deeper you may bow, and the poorer you feel and the guiltier you consider yourself to be, the more beauty you will find in Him. So much so that you will call out with the bride: *“He is*

altogether lovely!” (Song of Solomon 5:16) Oh, congregation, the manger of Bethlehem testifies to us of the Mediator who is both God and man, and who, in His humiliation, prepared complete salvation for lost people.

And today, on this Christmas Day, we preach Him to you. Here is the Sun of righteousness! Under His wings is healing. In Him the Lord unfolds His good pleasure. Here sinners may behold the evidence of God’s free and sovereign grace. Here lost ones may rejoice with wonder in the blessed message that the Lord is a God who gives. *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life”* (John 3:16). At the manger of Bethlehem kneels a people who are lost in themselves but are filled with awe and wonder as they confess, with broken voice, *“O God of hosts, O God of grace, how lovely is Thy holy place, how good and pleasant is Thy dwelling!”* (Psalter 421:1)

Are there among us such who are poor in spirit? Are there broken-hearted ones who, in secret, bemoan their distress before the Lord and pray with supplication: *“God be merciful to me, On Thy grace I rest my plea?”* (Psalter 140:1) Behold, here lies the Saviour of sinners. Given, yes, **given**, to deliver you from the deepest misery and to bring you, **even you**, to the ultimate bliss.

Are there some here today, both old and young, who hunger after righteousness? Then look and see that Bread of Life that came down from heaven. Are there those among us who are poor, blind and naked? See Him who came down from heaven and who has eye salve to open your blind eyes, who has robes of salvation to clothe the naked and who has comfort for those broken hearts. *“Joy to the world! The Lord is come; let earth receive her King!”* Here is a King for poor and needy sinners. He is so infinitely rich in His love, compassion and willingness. And He is a King who does not take; but instead, He is a king who gives freely.

The church of all ages sings of Him and of the salvation which He has prepared. Let’s join them as we sing from Psalter 292:1 and 5

*“Praise the Lord, for He is good,
For His mercies ever sure
From eternity have stood,
To eternity endure;
Let His ransomed people raise
Songs to their Redeemer’s praise.*

*Sons of men, awake to praise
God the Lord Who reigns above,
Gracious in His works and ways,
Wondrous in redeeming love;
Longing souls He satisfies,
Hungry hearts with good supplies.”*

The wonder of Christ’s birth at the time of Augustus’ registration.

What a contrast we see, congregation between Augustus and the heavenly King: *“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.”* Contrast that passage with John 3:16: *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son.”* This is the message of Luke 2. Caesar Augustus was an emperor who wanted to record and calculate how much tax he could extract from the people. God, in contrast, is a King who records and says: *“I give my Son to save sinners.”*

Caesar Augustus has sunk into death and oblivion, but the Child in the manger lives on and He sits on the throne. To Him is given all power in heaven and earth. Here the prophecy of Daniel comes to mind. In the second chapter of Daniel, we read of a massive statue that symbolized the kingdoms of the earth. We read also of a stone which was cut out without hands. The stone struck the image on its feet, which were made of iron and clay, and broke them into pieces. The stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.

In Luke 2, a little stone was cut out by divine hands. The little stone began to roll forward from Bethlehem and, as it continued to roll over the earth, it became bigger and bigger. Eventually, this stone shall destroy and pulverize the power of this world, the massive structure on its feet of clay, Satan’s power, the power of the Antichrist. In Luke 2, that does not seem possible. Nonetheless, as we read between the lines, we see something of King Jesus being Conqueror, despite the appearance of the opposite. After all, is it not remarkable that Augustus’ census had to work together with Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem?

Daniel’s prophecy was fulfilled in the fullness of time when Jesus was born. And that prophecy will be completely fulfilled when Jesus returns on the clouds of heaven to judge the quick and the dead. The victory is not Rome’s but Bethlehem’s. The final word of this world’s history is not that of the devil; it belongs to the King of Bethlehem.

Today this King of Bethlehem is knocking at the door of our heart and He asks us a question: Under whose banner have you registered? Are you still registered with Satan? Or is your name written in the book of the citizens of the Kingdom of God? Are you still fighting against King Jesus? Or has your resistance been broken? Do not ignore these questions, congregation! Give God your soul’s answer today, in all sincerity. Your eternal destiny is at stake: either for eternal bliss or for eternal woe! It is life or death. What a privilege, young people, if you may seek this King in your young life and if you may realize that He calls you to be registered for Him so that you may spend your life in His service through the heart-renewing power of the Holy Ghost. Without Him, can there be true joy? No! He alone makes your life truly meaningful. What benefit do joy and prosperity bring without God? *“For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?”* (Matthew 16:26)

What will be the end result of our lives if there is no Saviour? Simply this: despair, disillusionment and eternal damnation. Who then are the true Christmas celebrants? Those who, with grief, learn to see that of themselves they are on the side of Augustus and on the

side of Satan. Seeing this truth makes them poor in spirit and thus they begin to hunger and thirst after righteousness.

Congregation, only this born King, the God Who lives and gives, can fill their void and satisfy their need. Such people, when they may look into the manger of Bethlehem and behold the unspeakable Gift of God, are filled with wonder. They are astonished at the King’s giving and ask, “Lord, hast Thou come for me? Hast Thou so deeply humbled Thyself for such a sinner as I am?” As we consider that wonder of grace, the desire grows in the heart to know Him more and more, and also to fight, in His strength, against the enemies, against the devil and against the evil of your own heart and of the world. But soon all of these militants will be with Him, through His might, to share in the eternal victory.

Therefore, congregation, to both the elderly and young people among us, the only thing that matters is that a choice be made in our lives: The emperor on the throne of Rome and sin and the world, or the King of Bethlehem and that Child in the humble manger. We cannot serve two masters. It must become clear whose you are and whom you serve. Oh, learn to bow before that manger! Know this: Jesus wants to be where poor sinners are found. And where Jesus is, there a poor people are forever rich in Him. Then it will appear to be true, as it is also confirmed today: *“God will Himself confirm them with His blessing And on the roll of nations He will count All these as born on Zion’s holy mount In many tongues one God, one faith confessing”* (Psalter 442:4).

And so we have seen an emperor who takes in contrast to the God who gives. Thanks be to God for His unspeakable gift!

Amen.

Closing Psalter 238: 2, 3

*Heathen lands and hostile peoples
Soon shall come the Lord to know;
Nations born again in Zion
Shall the Lord’s salvation show,
God Almighty, God Almighty
Shall on Zion strength bestow.*

*When the Lord shall count the nations,
Sons and daughters He shall see,
Born to endless life in Zion,
And their joyful song shall be,
“Blessed Zion, Blessed Zion,
All our fountains are in thee.”*