

## The Birth of Jesus Christ

Rev. J. IJsselstein - Luke 2:1-7

(Christmas)

Sing: Psalter 109:1, 2

Read: Luke 2:1-20

Sing: Psalter 243:1, 2, 4, 15

Sing: Psalter 448:1, 4

Sing: Psalter 427:1, 6, 7

Congregation,

On this Christmas Day we will meditate on the birth of Jesus Christ, based on the passage of Scripture that was read to you. We will repeat verses 1 to 7:

*“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed every one into his own city. 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. 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.”*

The theme of this sermon is: The Birth of Jesus Christ. There are two main points which need our attention:

1. This birth was in the fullness of time
2. This birth was in deep humiliation

### 1. This birth was in the fullness of time

Boys and girls, if you were to ask something of your father or mother, you would rather have it straightaway, not later. Not at mom’s or dad’s time, but immediately, at your time. When you ask something of the Lord, you also would prefer to have it straightaway; not later, but immediately. Not at the Lord’s time, but immediately, at my time. When you don’t know the way anymore, when you don’t know how to carry on in life anymore, you can’t wait for answers, you want them straightaway. Not later, but *now*. Not at God’s time, but now, at my time!

When you are expecting a baby, and the end of the pregnancy is near, you want the baby to be born sooner rather than later. Not at God’s time, but at my time. But God’s way is different. In Ecclesiastes 11:5 we read, “As thou knowest not what is the way of the Spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all.” God’s ways are unsearchable. God’s time is not our time.

At Christmas we think back on the time when it was God’s time! Paul says in Galatians 4:4-5, “But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law. To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.” Christmas speaks of the fullness of time; the time appointed by God as the day of the birth of His Son into this lost world. That day was a normal day like all others, yet appointed of God to be the most wonderful day in the whole of human history. The day when the everlasting Father became a Child of time. Born of a woman. That day was not the 25<sup>th</sup> of December, which date is merely a human fabrication. The real date must have been some day in the summer. After all, in the middle of the night the shepherds were in the open fields with their flock and the manger was empty, which indicates that the animals were outside.

Let’s forget all human ideas about Christmas. No symbols, romance, lights, trees, or extravagant dinners fit this day. Rather, this day is a day which humbles man to the lowest. God was manifest in the flesh; He became man, because of the exceeding sinfulness of man. Let this day be a day of feeling ashamed, but also a day of awesome wonder because God, at His time, fulfilled the promise of the seed of the woman. God’s promises are ever true and will be fulfilled. His promise that sounded forth from the stillness of eternity, “Lo, I come.” His promise that sounded forth from the mouth of Micah, “But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting” (5:2). His promise sounded in the prophesy of Isaiah more than seven centuries ago, “For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given.” And now His promise is fulfilled, at God’s time, in the fullness of time, “in those days” as verse one words it. In those days when Caesar Augustus reigned, Emperor Octavianus, the eminent one, the divine one. In those dark days, the Roman Empire was at the height of its power and prosperity, and Israel was ruled by a Gentile emperor, who was worshipped as a divine being. In those days when people everywhere burned incense to him.

Read with me the first two verses of Luke 2, “And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria).”

*Will the word to Israel spoken  
By our father’s God, be broken?  
Must we in grief complain  
That His promises are vain?*

“Those days” were more hopeless than ever before. The prophets were silent, and the whole world bowed at the feet of Caesar Augustus. It was in those days that a decree went out from Caesar that all the world should be taxed. Everybody had to be registered, so that the taxes could be collected more efficiently. And so the whole world was on the move, everyone travelling to his or her place of birth. More tax revenues, more money for the army, which means further expansion of the Roman Empire. More power still for Caesar. It seemed like Satan was reigning.

Turn with me to verses 3 to 5, “And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. 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.”

Congregation, who rules the world? Look around you! We live in a time of famines, disasters, terrorist attacks, and wars. Who rules this world? Even Joseph and Mary, and the Babe in her womb had to obey the decree of Caesar. At his command they travelled from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea, because they were of the house and lineage of David. What, in fact, remained of that once flourishing kingdom of David? What remained of that once glorious royal family? Only this: two poor people who a few days later could only afford to buy a pair of doves as a sacrifice.

In the meantime they have been married. We know this because Joseph took Mary with him to be registered together. Luke still calls Mary his espoused wife, to signify that Joseph did not have intimate relations with her until after the birth of her firstborn son. He intended to leave her in secret in order to take the full blame of her pregnancy upon himself and to lift all suspicion from Mary, as we read in Matthew 1:19-21, “Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call His Name JESUS: for He shall save His people from their sins.”

This pregnancy was not of Joseph, but by the overshadowing of the power of the Highest. Together they had believed this promise of God, which undoubtedly had also brought a hearty unity through the bond of faith. “There shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse and a Branch shall grow out of his roots.” They carried that promise in wonder and humbleness, as becomes obvious in Mary’s song, “For He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden.” And so they travelled to Bethlehem.

They did not go against the decree of Caesar, but without doubt saw God’s hand in it, as the fulfilment of another promise, the one of Micah 5:2. “But thou, Bethlehem Ephrata, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.” Without doubt they believed that not Augustus but the Lord reigned. And he, Caesar Augustus, had to work together to bring this royal Child to Bethlehem.

God reigns. “He hath done whatsoever He hath pleased” (Psalm 115:3). He performs everything according to His will and council. And, without them being aware of it, Augustus and Cyrenius had to work together, as little cogwheels in the plan of God’s good pleasure. It seemed like they were the rulers of the world, but God stood above it all and through these men He executed His will and decree. However impossible it looked and however invisible it was for the eyes of man, yet God was going to fulfil His promises, the promises we read of in Luke 1:52, “He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree,” and verse 71, “That we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us.”

The Lord reigns. Back then, but also today. That is the comfort in this account. However unsearchable God’s ways are, He performs all things according to the council of His will. And, however dark God’s ways may seem to us, He looks down in favour on them that fear Him. His promises will surely be fulfilled, though it may be dark and hopeless, and though everything can turn out differently than thought.

This was also the case here. In Luke 1 there were still great expectations. In verses 32 and 33 we read, “He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of his father David. And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of His kingdom there shall be no end.”

But in our text it looks like Caesar and the governor rule everything. However, that is not true! All is in God’s hand. He brings His Child, the Son of His good pleasure, to that place where it will become abundantly clear why He was sent. Augustus and Cyrenius led the King of the Jews to the place of deep humiliation. He went there willingly; He wanted to be born in that place. They led Him to the stable, a place for animals.

That brings us to our second point:

## **2. This birth was in deep humiliation**

In Luke 2:7 we read, “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.” As they arrived in Bethlehem, Mary’s contractions started. Picture them as they walked through the township of Bethlehem. Maybe it is already evening. Joseph knocks here, then there, but everywhere the answer is the same: NO ROOM! “Because there was no room for them in the inn.” Everywhere they find closed doors, “Full, no room.” “Pregnant? At the point of giving birth? Sorry, no room.” What a suffering, what a trial for those two children of God! They are the carriers of the promise; they obediently went in God’s way; they rejoiced in anticipation of the fulfilment of the promises of God, and now it seems everything is against them. We do not read that they were upset, but yet there is no room for them.

That is how it can be experienced in the life of God’s children. Those who have come to know something of Christ their Saviour and Mediator; those who learned something of His sovereign love for sinners. They, too, can experience that there is no place for them anymore.

In every pub there is place for a jovial fellow; on every café terrace there is room for a worldly talker. In other places there is plenty of room for pious talkers. But there is no room for those who count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus. And that is true not only in the world, but also within the church. How little room is there for those who love Christ, believe in Him, and desire His centrality in things. There is no room for such people. No, do not think this is only the case in the Roman Catholic Church, or liberal protestant churches, but also among us!

The case of the yet unborn Christ brought suffering in the life of these two young Christians. All those who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. We read in John 15: 20, “If they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.” And so we see these two, Joseph and Mary, walking through Bethlehem, tired, and maybe depressed. They find no room until they arrive at a stable. They had such high expectations. They carried the promises of God in their heart and now they end up in a stable. This way is not foreign to God’s children here on earth. It is a way of disappointments and persecution; a way of cross-bearing and suffering; a way of being neglected and cast out, a way of being a stranger; a way of not belonging.

The mother, who carried this royal Child, and Joseph, with all their joyful hope and expectation, end up in a stable. This way, however, is not unknown for God’s children. They

recognize it from their own heart. There can be so much hope and expectation, promises, and a waiting for the fulfilment thereof. But the fulfilment comes at the fullness of time, at God’s time, and ... in a stable.

We can try to polish ourselves up, to make our heart a palace, but all our attempts of self-improvement will fail. We work and toil to prepare as it were a beautiful cradle ready to receive this royal Child, but it is all in vain. We hope that our love and our longing will move God to come and enter into our heart, without realizing what really lives in that heart!

But when God starts to work and our heart progresses with that, what will remain of all our self-reformation? When it turns out that all our labouring and toiling is essentially nothing more than a continuous stumbling and falling? And when all our love and our longing pales in the light of God’s uncovering grace, do we really see love? No, hatred; that is what lives in our heart! Longing? No, enmity, rebellion, and dislike characterize our heart! Then nothing will be left of our good works, of our longing, and of our love. Nothing but a guilty and lost sinner before God remains.

*I have sinned against Thy grace,  
And provoked Thee to Thy face,  
I confess Thy judgment just.*

We will never look into the manger of Bethlehem without ever having learned something of what David confessed, “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Psalm 51:5). We may in the past have experienced much comfort and encouragement, strong hope on the Lord; we may even have been singing, “We go from strength to strength.” We may have been really sorry for our sins and been full of zeal to serve the Lord, full of works, full of good intentions, full of love, full of tears, full of promises. But when God starts to work in us, and continues that work, He takes everything away.

At times it can be so dark in our life. We have to learn that from our side all is without hope, all is lost. Our heart is a heart full of sin that cannot be rooted out, an incorrigible heart. Yes, in times past we were able to pray so earnestly, we were able to trust, shed tears because of sorrow for and repentance of sin, but now all is gone. Was it ever true? Was it really God’s work or did I make it up myself? What is left of all what we enjoyed and of all that we had set our hopes on? Nothing, nothing but a dirty stable.

That was also what was left for Joseph and Mary, a stable. This was also the place left for Christ Himself, because there was no room for them in the inn. “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.” Her firstborn son, God of God, Light of Light, the

second Person of that perfect divine Being took upon Him a human body, a human nature and was born in a stable. As the custom was in these days, His parents wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and full of love, they lay Him in the manger. That sounds almost romantic in our language, but in reality it was a cold, wooden feeding trough. Here we do not hear the joyful sound of Psalm 24:7, “Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be lifted up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of glory shall come in.” No, here the Lord of glory is laid in a manger.

He who, being in the form of God, made Himself of no reputation, He emptied Himself, poured Himself out, and took upon Him the form of a servant--the very lowest place, the very lowest form of a poor and rejected child, for whom there was no room. He, whose going forth have been from of old, from everlasting, He became a Child. His sinlessness and His deep humiliation distinguished Him from all other children. Here you see the reality of our lost state. Christmas is not a sweet and dreamy romantic feast. Christmas is also not a feast to give presents to each other. Christmas testifies us of our wretchedness and enmity against God. He came to His own and His own received Him not. He was born but not awaited. He came, but no one bid Him welcome.

Christ came into a world full of people who hate Him and God; people, who live in bitter enmity and rebellion against Him. And in such a world Christ wanted to be born, a world in which He was never welcome from the beginning until the end of His life. Here we just have the beginning of it, but it is, as it were, that in the distance we already hear the crowd before Pilate crying with a loud voice, “Away with Him, crucify Him!” (John 19:15). That is why Christmas is not at all a feast of sweet and lovely music. It is a feast that in a very grave manner points us to our enmity against God.

Did you ever celebrate Christmas like this? Let this Child in the manger be a mirror for you and me to show us our lost state. By nature, you and I hate Him and His Father. And still, still He came! In spite of our enmity, He came! Although we did not await Him, He came without being asked!

Notwithstanding our attempts to rather bring about our own salvation, He came. He came in deep humiliation! The word “notwithstanding” renders Christmas a real feast! An unsearchable wonder of God. God revealed in the flesh, in spite of our doings. Christ became poor, despite our doings, although He was rich.

This rendered the birth of Christ, also for Joseph and Mary, Christmas indeed. Although their way ended in a stable; although they, despite all the promises, had nothing left but misery and need, yet when they embraced the Child all was well. “Therefore, that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God!” His Name is Jesus because He

saves His people from their sin. Emmanuel: God with us. In spite of us. Yes, nevertheless, “with us.”

Those who find nothing in themselves anymore, but, who by grace may embrace this Child, have everything! Even though the world may threaten us; even though they may deny us a place among them, even though our situation may be hopelessly miserable; even though we see our heart to be nothing but a dirty stable, yet there, yes, exactly there, God reveals His Son. There, in that place and in those circumstances, Joseph and Mary in faith embraced their Child, God’s Son. There that miserable, lowly stable becomes a gate of heaven. There we hear the praises of a lost sinner, “Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up ... and the King of glory shall come in.” There, where we have nothing left but misery and guilt, where all is lost on our side, there God reveals His Son. There we see Him, deeply humbled and poor. There we see Him as the Fairest among the children of men; grace is poured into His lips. There we see Him, a friend of publicans and sinners. He is willing to enter the hearts of guilty sinners who are worthy of death.

Before we finish with a word of application, let us first sing Psalter 448, stanzas 1 and 4.

**Stanza 1**

*Blest be the God of Israel,  
The Lord who visited His own;  
Who by His gracious providence  
Redemption unto us made known.  
Within His servant David's tent  
Has He to us, His people, sent  
A horn of full salvation;  
E'en as He spoke by holy men of old,  
Who unto Israel foretold  
How He to them His mercy would unfold.*

**Stanza 2**

*Yea, thou shalt make salvation known,  
That we may be revived again,  
Receiving favor as His own,  
In free remission of our sin,  
Through God's compassion and His love  
Whereby the Dayspring from above  
Has visited His people;  
To lighten them that in darkness hide,  
And in the shades of death abide;  
Our feet into the way of peace to guide.*

Congregation, this feast of the deep humiliation of Christ contains a message for all of you. In the first place, for you, hardened sinner. You, who live in enmity and hatred against God and Christ. Until now you have rejected Him. There was no room for Him in your heart. Maybe you say within yourself, and it may sound very orthodox, “Yes, but the Lord has to make room for Himself.” Do not hide yourself behind this thought, you who so many times refused Him, so many times have put Him off. You are to be blamed for the fact that you did not see any beauty in Him, that you did not see anything desirable in Him. It is the result



of your sin and rebellion against God! However, consider this wonder: Christ came into the world to seek and to save that which was lost. “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).

Consider then, while it is still the time of grace, that God’s bowels yearn for lost sinners. He humbled Himself so deeply to die the cursed death on the cross. Oh, do not despise His humiliation, but think and meditate on so much love for such deeply fallen sinners. May that thought break your heart! Come and acknowledge (and may God open your eyes to see it) that your heart is like a dirty, miserable stable. I am not calling you to open your heart for Him as if to welcome Him in a beautifully decorated palace. No, instead I pray that you cry and plead for the powerful opening of the doors of the filthy stable of your lost heart. Unconcerned and hardened sinners, acknowledge this day the things which belong to your peace.

In the second place, I have a message for you, awakened sinner. The danger you are in is life-threatening. Your heart is touched and moved. But if you rest in your present condition, your heart will become harder than it was ever before. Therefore, make great haste for the sake of your soul. Let your salvation be your foremost concern. Not by making your heart better in order to welcome Christ. Not by working hard to merit His coming in your heart. Not by tears and by your love to welcome Him. Let that all be taken from you. Salvation is a gift, a free gift, given to perishing sinners who have lost everything of self.

We always like to come to Christ with our tears and our experiences, but the faith given by God has nothing and comes with nothing, but in need stretches out an empty hand and flees to a rich Christ. Only in this way can life and rest for your soul be found.

In the third place, I have message for you, convicted sinners. You who are longing, hungering, and thirsting after God’s righteousness, look this morning within, in your heart. Must you not honestly confess before God, what wretchedness inside! So much sin, so much guilt. No love, but hatred. There is no room for Him, only rebellion and opposition. No life, only death. What is left of God’s work in your heart? What is left of the time when you were able to sing: *We go from strength to strength*. Perhaps now you have to say with Asaph, “I am as a beast before Thee” (Psalm 73:22).

Come, yes, come somewhat closer. You who have nothing left in self, come and look this morning in the manger of Bethlehem. See there Emmanuel: God with us. “For He hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:21). There lays the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of

the world. Let nothing hinder you to look unto Him. Satan and people may try to keep you away from Him. Satan may whisper, “You? You have sinned too much.” But this Child says, “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (Isaiah 1:18).

People may say, “It’s not that easy; you can’t go to Christ just like that. That is only for good people who have a holy and sensitive heart.” But this Child says, “Give Me your heart. Even if it is dead (and it is dead), I will make it alive. Even if it is cold and hard (and yes, it is cold and hard), I will make it a heart of flesh.” Pious churchgoers may perhaps say, “You are far too sinful.” However, don’t take notice of them. Christ came to seek and to save that which was lost. And that gives you the warrant to go to Him even if you were the greatest sinner of all. Are you a great sinner? That is exactly the reason why you must go to Him. To whom else can you go? He alone has the words of eternal life!

When your need presses you and your guilt burdens you, when everything seems cut off, when it seems that God’s promises will never be fulfilled, then do not give up hope! This is just the way in which God fulfils His Word. We see that also here with Joseph and Mary. God works through the impossible.

Therefore, if everything seems impossible and without hope, then do not despair, but take courage. In this way He fulfils His promises. This way will lead you to the stable. This way will bring you to bow down at the manger of Bethlehem as a poor sinner who has nothing left but sin and guilt.

Someone once said, “Spiritual needs, hunger, thirst, crosses, affliction, and self-knowledge are our best friends, because they bring us to Christ. Where the cry is heard, “lost, lost,” there all is safe because there is room for Christ and His work. A convicted sinner cannot sink deeper than the cry “lost,” because then one sinks upon Christ and the soul is saved.”

In the fourth place, there is a message for saved sinners in our midst. Stand in awed wonder on this Christmas Day. Christ wanted to be born in a stable. There was no room. If God had not acted, all would have been lost forever. In yourself you were as a helpless and lost child, cast out in the open field. But God says through the prophet Ezekiel, “And when I passed by thee, and saw thee polluted in thine own blood, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live; yea, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live” (Ezekiel 16:6). Let this day be a day of amazement and wonder. Whoever committed so much evil against so much good and whoever did so much good over against so much evil! “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).

Let on this day your eye of faith be on the Child in the manger. Let it, through grace, be a view of dismay at the sinfulness of your heart. Let it also be a view of awesome wonder at such incomprehensible love for sinners. But let it also be a looking in trust, being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ. Stand in awe and rejoice!

Christmas points not only to the depth of our lost state and guilt, but it is especially the feast of the unsearchable love of Christ. He gave Himself to die in love for hell-worthy sinners. “And she brought forth her first born son and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.” God sent His Son to the earth, although there was no room for Him. Christ came and gave His life, although there was no room for Him. The Spirit of God works in sinful hearts, although there is no room for Him. That is why all honour and glory be to God alone, now and unto all eternity.

And that is why we call you on this Christmas Day to sing, and this will also be the song of the redeemed sinners whose song will eternally mingle with the hallelujahs of the millions of holy angels:

*Praise God, from whom all blessings flow,  
Praise Him all creatures here below,  
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host,  
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.*

Amen.

Closing Psalter: Psalter 427:1, 6, 7

**Stanza 1**

*Let all exalt Jehovah's goodness,  
For most compassionate is He;  
His mercy, excellent in fullness,  
Endureth to eternity.  
Let Israel praise Jehovah's  
goodness,  
And say, Exalt His majesty;  
His mercy, excellent in fullness,  
Endureth to eternity.*

**Stanza 6**

*This is the day of full salvation  
That God has made and sanctified;  
Come, let us voice our jubilation,  
And triumph in the grace supplied.  
Save, O Jehovah, we implore Thee,  
Save now Thy people, e'en today;  
Prosperity send Thou in mercy.  
And favor us upon our way.*

**Stanza 7**

*Now blessed be the King of Glory,  
That cometh in Jehovah's Name;  
Out of His temple we adore Thee,  
And all Thy blessedness proclaim.  
The Lord is mighty; He provideth  
A light for us with sore afraid;  
Then be our thankful sacrifices  
Upon the sacred altar laid.*