

Luke 2:1-7

“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius (Kurenias) was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.”

This story has become so familiar to us. This is the one part of the Bible that almost everyone knows no matter what their faith background is. And it seems happenstance doesn't it? Rome calls for this over arching census and it happens to be when Mary is 9 months pregnant, they have to travel, they are not prepared with anyplace to stay, and then baby Jesus ends up being born in an animal shelter. It seems like an accident and a messy story. You can almost imagine Joseph saying “could anything else go wrong?” But I want to assure you tonight that what is really happening in this passage, down to the littlest detail, is happening by design, for a reason, and at just the right time. There is nothing accidental about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem during this time in Roman history. Nothing is happening by chance. In fact the Apostle Paul states in Galatians 4 that quote “But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman.” When the set time had fully come. What does Paul mean by this? What is God doing here? Is this an accident like it sounds, or is this deliberate?

Well, the first thing we have to consider about this “time” that Jesus came is what happened leading up to that time. Going back to Genesis God gave the prophets clues as to who the Messiah would be. In fact God made promises. And if God is going to be worth our attention God is going to have to keep God's promises. And Jesus had to come from the tribe and lineage that had been prophesied. He has to go all the way back to Abraham, through the tribe of Judah, and from the line of David. And Joseph met all those requirements. The passage that we just read specifies that Joseph is in Bethlehem for this census because he is from the house and line of David. But to be fair there were others there that would have met these requirements, so there must be more that contributes to the timing of the coming of Christ than just Joseph's lineage.

There is also the place prophesied. In Micah we are told that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Now Joseph lived in Nazareth. So for the Messiah to be born, this descendent of Abraham and Judah and Jesse and David would have to be in Bethlehem. And the census that Rome calls for requires Joseph to go back to Bethlehem, his family's place of origin, in order to be counted. So the place factors in also. And to be frank, Bethlehem is not a significant place. It was a small town. Jerusalem was the significant place for the Jewish people. That was where the temple was. But God chose Bethlehem and Micah recorded that long before Jesus' birth. But was Joseph the only guy with the right lineage to travel to or live in Bethlehem? Probably not. So the lineage and the place matter, but they still don't explain why this was just the right time. There is more to this.

We know from the first verse of this passage that the birth of Jesus happens during the reign of Caesar Augustus. And the well-recorded history of the Roman empire tells us that this would be during the period known as the Pax Romana. Augustus, formerly known as Octavian, had many military campaigns in the years

leading up to this to win territories like Egypt and Africa and what is now Greece. And by this time he is in control of the entire known world. The whole known world is under one leadership. This means there are no borders. We have heard a lot about borders recently haven't we? This big dispute over a border wall in the budget. Borders are a big deal to a country. But the known world, the Roman Empire, had no borders. Trade, commerce, and what will be the ministry of Jesus Christ could spread without any resistance. This was a time with no warring factions. Up to this time there had been wars and land disputes that would have made it impossible for Jesus' ministry to be successful. For starters, if Augustus had not defeated Egypt prior to Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph would not have been able to flee to Egypt when Jesus was about 2 years old to escape Herod's plot to kill him. And Jesus' ministry throughout Galilee and the spread of the church after his resurrection? That would have gotten lost in the shuffle of battles and conquests. The little Jesus movement would have been forgotten. But at this point in time the world is united by language and commerce. There is no other time like this in human history, before then or since then. So the timing is perfect.

The state of the Roman empire also makes this the perfect time for Jesus to come when it comes to Jewish history. Under the time of Pax Romana the Jewish people are able to practice their faith without a lot of persecution. They are able to have their temple and are able to worship. They are exempt from military service for Rome. And this paves the way for Jesus to be able to grow up Jewish with a Jewish education. And it makes it possible for him to teach in local synagogues when his ministry begins. In Jewish history prior to this, when they were under the control of the Assyrians and then the Persians, he would not have been able to do either of these things. So again, Jesus is born at just the right time. And then of course there are details like the fact that Jesus is Mary's first born child and she is a virgin. Again, these things are in line with what God told the prophets in the Old Testament. All the details have to be there. Everything has to line up. And it does. God is using the right people, Mary and Joseph, with the right lineage, the right details, and at just the right time in human history.

So why does it matter that Jesus came at just the right time in God's plan? Why am I spending time on these few verses from Luke 2? Well, there are Two reasons: One, because it means we have a God that has a plan and that God is going to see it through. Everything in the Bible is one big plan. It is God's plan to save us and be with us. It is one plan from the beginning of time until what will be the end of time. This book (the Bible) is not a set of random stories where people encountered God. It is a carefully and perfectly crafted to plan to save humanity. And it is a plan rooted in love. It is out of love that God does all of this. God does not need to do this. God does not need us. But God does want us. And so Jesus coming into this world is the plan from the very beginning. God has a plan to save us because we will not be able to save ourselves. The question is, where do you want to fit into that plan? It is going to happen with or without you. All of what is in here does not hinge on you or I. God will accomplish God's goal no matter what. In Isaiah 55 God's Word says this: "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." God has a plan and it will be accomplished. But how do you want to participate in that plan? Do you want to be part of it? Do you want to be in relationship with the God that created you and has a plan for you? Or do you want to go it alone? You have a choice.

It was the Sunday after Christmas at St Peter and Saint Paul's Church in Borden, Kent, England. Father John was looking at the nativity scene prior to packing away the figures when he noticed the baby Jesus was

missing from the scene. Immediately, Father John turned to go back in the church in order to call the police. But as he was about to do so, he saw little Harry with a red wagon, and in the wagon was the figure of the little infant, Jesus. Father John walked up to Harry and said, 'Well, Harry, where did you get the little infant?' Harry replied honestly, 'I took him from the church, Father John.' 'And why did you take him?' With a sheepish smile, Harry said, 'Well, about a week before Christmas I prayed to little Lord Jesus. I told him if he would bring me a red wagon for Christmas, I would give him a ride around the block in it.'

Friends, Jesus is not a figurine to be packed in a box 11 months of the year and then taken out for a month of display. Jesus is the very real son of God, alive, wanting you to do what the little boy in the joke did...take him home with you. This master plan of God's love is unfolding all around you. And you can be part of it. You can get to know the God of love and enter his glory at the end of time. And Jesus is the way to do that. Accepting the reality and resurrection of Jesus is the way to be part of the plan.

I said earlier that there are two reasons why God's perfect timing matters. One, it means that God has a plan that will be fulfilled and you need to get in on that. The Second reason that God's timing being perfect matters is that God's timing in your life is also perfect. Nothing happens by chance. You are here tonight for a reason. However you got here tonight, whether it was at the invitation of a friend or by the insistence of your mother or you just happened to come downtown for Christmas Eve and popped in the doors, that was not by chance. God will reach out to you in your life at just the right time. And tonight may be part of that. If God can put together just the right sequence of people and events and prophecies over the course of thousands of years, God certainly has you on his radar. And God knows just the right time in your life to get your attention. It may have already happened for you. I know a lot of you love the Lord and actively walk with Jesus in your life now. But I also know some of you have not made that decision yet. Some of you may not have heard the good news in just the right way yet or had the right person in your life share their faith with you, or you are just not open to the Holy Spirit yet. But wherever you are in your relationship with God, I can promise you that God will reach out to you at just the right time. And God's blessings for you will be at just the right time. God's timing is perfect, we can count on that.

Now I admit that it does not always feel like God's timing is perfect. Sometimes I want to say "God, why now?" Just like Joseph was probably saying as Mary went into labor and there was no place for them to even stay. I am sure it did not feel like good timing. We can see looking back how God was doing exactly what needed to be done at just the right time, but it would not have felt that way for Mary and Joseph at the time. And this is something that we can be encouraged by as we seek to trust God in our lives. When things feel like they are happening at all the wrong times for us, we can know that in the grand scheme of things God has this. God knows what God is doing and we can trust that even in times in our lives when things feel uncertain or messy. And there is plenty of messiness going on in the world today isn't there?

We have a government in gridlock. We have wars being fought in multiple countries. We have climate change. We have poverty. We have racism. We have oppression. We have so many things wrong with the world we live in right now. But on this Christmas eve night what the coming of Jesus into this world can tell us and the way he came into this world can assure us is that God has a plan and that plan is for our benefit. The plan is to save us. And that did not happen by chance. It was and is a deliberate move on God's part.

And God has already done everything necessary to save us. Jesus died on the cross to buy our forgiveness and he rose again to beat death so that we can worship a living God which is the only kind of God worth

worshipping. Jesus coming into this world, which is what we celebrate on Christmas, is both the culmination of everything God planned up to that point since the creation of the world, and it is also just the beginning of what God was going to do on the cross and through the resurrection. And we now live in the time between the resurrection and Jesus coming again. The plan is still unfolding. But are we willing to respond and be part of the plan?

None of what God has done happened by chance. So friends I know that it is not by chance that you are here and hearing these words tonight. If God can unfold this plan using thousands of years of generations to accomplish it, God has his eye on you. So I want you to consider God's timing tonight. On that first Christmas Jesus Christ came into the world at just the right time, even though it looked like chaos. And that same God is still at work in the chaos of our world today and you are part of God's plan. So think about what that means for you. It means that God knows you, that God loves you, and Jesus wants to go home with you. Don't just see him as a baby in a Nativity scene. See him as God's compassion and love for you. This is God's gift to you. Because of Jesus, you can participate in God's plan. This is God's grace offered to you. Will you take him home with you? I hope so. I hope that we all do. And the way to do that is like any other relationship you have. Ask Jesus to be part of your life and then get to know him. Spend time in prayer and in the Bible and with other Christians and get to know God. God's timing is perfect. And just as Christ came into this world at just the right time, Jesus wants to enter your life at just the right time and participate in your life at all times. May that be true for you today in in the days to come. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen.