

Luke 2:1-7
I'll Be Home for Christmas

Main idea: Jesus was born among us and made His home among us, in our very hearts.

I want to begin this morning by asking you a question: what are some of your favorite Christmas traditions? They can be silly, or serious, whether they're related to church, or home, school, or work, it doesn't matter. What would you say are some of your favorite Christmas traditions?

One of my favorite Christmas traditions is just eating with extended family. I love food in general, but there's just something about a good Christmas meal. Because when we all get together, everyone makes their best side dishes, and there's so much variety, and you can get a little taste of this and a little taste of that, so that after you finish your plate, you can go back and get even more of the things you liked the most.

There are a lot of traditions that we hold sacred. Traditions are a good thing! Traditions often make us happy and comfortable, and we look forward to traditions because we can count on them.

You've probably heard the story about the tradition in which a little girl learned how to cook a pot roast. When watching her mom cook the roast, the little girl noticed that her mom cut the ends off of a pot roast before putting it on the pan and into the oven to cook for dinner. She had seen her mom do this many times before but had never asked her why. So this time she asked, and her mom replied,

"I don't know why I cut the ends off, but that's what my mom always did, and I learned it from her. Why don't you ask your Grandma?" So the little girl called her grandmother on the phone and said, "Grandma, why do you cut the ends off the pot roast before cooking it?" Her grandmother replied, "I don't know. That's just the way my mom always cooked it. Why don't you ask her?" Now feeling like she was on a bit of a mission to uncover the truth, the girl then called her great grandmother, who was living in a nursing home, and she asked her the same question. "Great Grandma, why did you cut the ends off the pot roast before cooking it?" And her great grandmother did not reply, "I cut off the ends of the pot roast because that's what my mother did." And she did not say because it makes the meat juicier. She said, "Well, sweetie, when I was first married, we were very poor, and we had a very small oven, and a very small pan, and the pot roast didn't fit on the pan or in the oven unless I cut the ends off!"

Tradition itself isn't a bad thing, but sometimes it can lead us to do and believe some very silly things.¹ And when our traditions aren't rooted in Scripture, we ought to be very careful about them, because sometimes we can begin to elevate our traditions to the point that we think that participating in the traditions themselves is as important as obeying God and Scripture.

We started talking last week about Christmas by asking the question: when was Jesus born? Of course, we all know that we celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25, AD 1, but we also don't have any solid historical evidence that this was actually the date on which He was born.

¹ Matthew 15:3

Last week, we acknowledged that it's almost impossible to date Jesus's birth according to when John the Baptist may have been born, because even though we're told that Zechariah was of the Levitical division of Abijah,² and the Levitical priests took turns for the temple service, so we should be able to look up and know exactly when he served, and therefore exactly when he got the news that his wife would become pregnant, we also found that there's a lot of disagreement even about how their temple service rotations worked.

So we're going to continue digging into this question, but change strategies, looking at an entirely different issue from another passage which might actually help us determine it a bit more.

Luke 2:1-7.

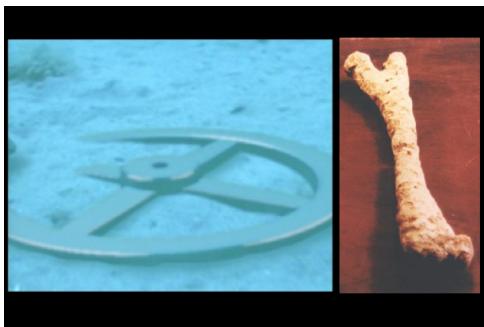
In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole empire should be registered. This first registration took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So everyone went to be registered, each to his own town. Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family line of David, to be registered along with Mary, who was engaged to him and was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. Then she gave birth to her firstborn son, and she wrapped him tightly in cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. (Luke 2:1-7)

² Luke 1:8-9

Father, all these years later, we're still in awe of the birth of Jesus, since it's only through Jesus that we can know You and be saved from our sins. So we're also amazed at all the circumstances which took place in order for Jesus to be born. Help us not just to believe these things, but to see Your hand in them, as You accomplished and continue to accomplish Your will. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Like many of the biblical stories, there are many skeptics who question whether the events of Jesus's birth happened the way that the Bible says they did. But time and time again, archaeology confirms what the Bible says.

[Picture of Red Sea artifacts]



Chariot wheels have been found where the Egyptians were drowned in the Red Sea,³ along with human and horse fossils preserved by coral.

[Picture of Jericho artifacts]

³ Exodus 14:26-27



Remains from Jericho show that the walls fell just as the Bible describes.⁴

[Picture of Dead Sea Scrolls]



Not to mention the countless scrolls and parchments that give us great confidence that the books and letters in the Bible haven't changed or been tampered with, as skeptics often say, but rather show that we can absolutely trust the Bible on all matters of history and doctrine.⁵

I share these things because like last week, we might at first not see the clues in this passage that situate this story into a specific time in history. Sometimes we can get so familiar with the traditions of our faith, and overlook that our faith isn't just built on a nice story, but established upon events that really happened. And the Bible is always written in such a way as to lead us to have a joyful faith

⁴ Joshua 6:20

⁵ Matthew 5:18, Luke 21:33

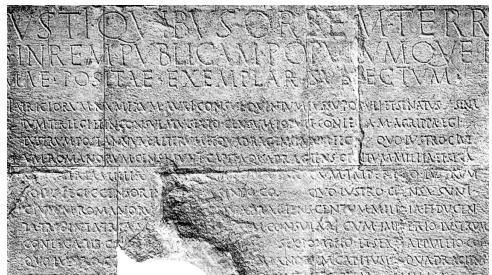
that's built not upon vague wishful thinking, but upon the historicity of the biblical events.⁶

So if we read our text today carefully, we actually find that it says a lot about when Jesus was born. Verse 1.

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole empire should be registered. (Luke 2:1)

So just prior to the birth of Jesus, the emperor of the Roman world wanted to take a census of the people who lived in his kingdom. This was not an annual census, but it was not uncommon either. Historical records show that they happened around every 5 years.⁷

[Picture of Res Gestae]



This is a picture of part of the Res Gestae, which is actually Caesar Augustus's own autobiography in which he describes taking a census of the Roman empire on several occasions.

Basically, he wanted to get an accurate account of all the people that he could tax and draft into the military if need be. And this is relevant to our question today because in order to get an accurate census, the government wanted as many people as possible to

⁶ John 2:11, John 20:31

⁷ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/2011census/howourcensusworks/aboutcensuses/censushistory/censustakingintheancientworld>

travel back to their hometowns. Therefore, Caesar Augustus wouldn't have chosen a colder month to do that. He would have chosen one of the more mild, less extreme months of the year, whether between April and May in the spring, or September and October in the fall. Basically, the less extreme weather encouraged more people to be able to travel and go back to their hometown for the census.

But Luke gives additional information about this census in verse 2.

This first registration took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. (Luke 2:2)

Now, this is actually kind of confusing, because according to most sources, Quirinius actually didn't become the governor of Syria until several years later.⁸ But this shouldn't worry us too much, since Quirinius was a Roman senator at the time, and Luke was simply reminding his readers what position Quirinius would hold in the future. It's kind of like if we were to say President George Washington led the United States to declare their independence from England in 1776, even though George Washington didn't become the first president until more than a decade after that, and yet, referring to him as the president reminds us of what he would become.

So what we have here is Luke telling us that Quirinius, who would soon become governor of Syria, was involved in the Roman census being taken. And, evidently, this was the first census that Quirinius was involved with. So, once again, this tells us a lot, and at the

⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quirinius>

same time, very little about when this actually took place. Because, once again, these censuses took place every 5 years, and we don't know exactly when Quirinius became a Roman senator.

Regardless, because of the census being taken, Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem. Verse 3.

So everyone went to be registered, each to his own town. Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family line of David, to be registered along with Mary, who was engaged to him and was pregnant. (Luke 2:3-5)

So Joseph and Mary went home for Christmas. Or, more specifically, they went back to Joseph's hometown, since they were engaged and would be counted together as one family. And it was here that Jesus was born. Verse 6.

While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. Then she gave birth to her firstborn son, and she wrapped him tightly in cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. (Luke 2:6-7)

Caesar Augustus had no idea about any of this, of course, and yet his desire to count the people led to Scripture being fulfilled. Micah 5:2 says:

Bethlehem Ephrathah, you are small among the clans of Judah; One will come from you to be ruler over Israel for Me. His origin is from antiquity, from eternity. (Micah 5:2)

You know, we often picture all this happening in the dead of winter, because that's when we celebrate it, and that's tradition. And there's a lot about the Christmas story that we accept as history even though it's only a part of tradition.

For example, in most Christmas plays, Joseph goes up to the innkeeper, asks for a room, and the innkeeper turns him away. But you actually don't have to read this story too carefully to know that the Bible never even mentions an innkeeper! In fact, many biblical scholars today question if there was even an inn at all.

The word traditionally translated “inn” in many Bible versions is the greek word καταλύματι which can certainly be translated “inn,” or “lodging place,” or, like I read in the Christian Standard Bible today, “guest room.”⁹ In fact, the only other two times that this word is used in the Bible, it’s more clearly translated, “guest room.”¹⁰ Jesus used this word when telling his disciples what to do in order to find a room to eat the Lord’s Supper with them. He told them in Luke 22, starting in verse 8:

Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, “Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover.” “Where do you want us to prepare it?” they asked him. “Listen,” he said to them, “when you’ve entered the city, a man carrying a water jug will

⁹ Strong’s Concordance #2646

¹⁰ Mark 14:14, Luke 22:11

meet you. Follow him into the house he enters. Tell the owner of the house, ‘The Teacher asks you, “Where is the guest room where I can eat the Passover with my disciples?”’ Then he will show you a large, furnished room upstairs. Make the preparations there.” (Luke 22:8-12)

So it's clear that this guest room wasn't in an inn, but rather was a guest room, in the upper room of the man's house. So the argument goes that Joseph, going back to his hometown, wouldn't have gone to stay at an inn, but would have stayed with his extended family, in a guest room. But since everyone else was also going to stay with extended family at this time, there just weren't any guest rooms available, but there was a place for them amongst the animals.

Now, some you right now might be thinking, “I can't believe he doubts the Christmas story! What kind of pastor is he, calling into question what we've always known about Jesus's birth!”

But that's exactly my point. I haven't disagreed with anything the Bible actually says, only with traditions that we've come to accept about these things.

And actually, whether it was an inn or not is kind of irrelevant. The point is, there didn't seem to be room for the Son of God to be born among us. So instead, He was born in the lowest of common settings.¹¹ You see, when Jesus couldn't find a home on earth that would accept Him, He made His home in us, common sinners.¹²

¹¹ Matthew 11:29

¹² 1 Corinthians 1:28-29

For God proved His love in this way: that even while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.¹³

Well, like most barns today, the stable that Jesus was born in certainly wouldn't have been the most comfortable place, and wouldn't have provided much warmth any time of the year. But if the census was being taken sometime between August and October as we've been theorizing this morning, this would be plausible.

So does this tell us specifically when Jesus was born? No. And it doesn't even really rule out December completely, because emperors often broke the rules and did things however they wanted. And December in the Middle East, while not warm at night, would have been more like December in Florida rather than Illinois, so not as frigid as we might imagine. And yet, regardless of when all these things happened, we can clearly see how God worked to bring it about through all the events that came together just as the Hebrew Scripture said that they would.

Because even though we don't know when Joseph and Mary went home, we do know that they went home. And even if we don't know if they talked to an innkeeper about staying at the inn, or if it was just Joseph's own family that didn't have room for them, we do know that Jesus was born and was placed in a manger. And because we know these things, we have reason to celebrate His birth with our families, even if we do it at a certain time and in certain ways because of our traditions.

¹³ Romans 5:8

So I do hope sometime this Christmas season you'll see your family. That's a good tradition. And if you haven't spoken with your family in many years, it's a great time of year to reconcile with them, just as God reconciles us as we trust in Jesus.¹⁴ But even more than being with family because of tradition, celebrate that Jesus was born among us and made His home among us, in our very hearts, so that you could know Him and be saved in Him.¹⁵

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:20

¹⁵ Philippians 3:8-10