

SERMON NOTES

Sunday, August 17, 2008

A MOMENT IN HISTORY: THE BIRTH OF THE FIRSTBORN

Synaxis Gospel

Luke 2:1-7

INTRODUCTION

Luke is a historian. In his opening statement, he states his intention, after careful investigation, to write out in consecutive order “the things accomplished among us”¹ so that the exact truth might be known.² His Gospel is grounded in time with notices of the historical markers of the days he records. For example, he notes that John the Baptist was born in “the days of Herod, King of Judea.” John began to baptize in the wilderness “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.”³

Six months after John’s conception, Luke records that the angel Gabriel appeared to a young virgin, Mary, with the announcement that she would bear the promised Davidic King, the One Who would reign forever.⁴ In our reading, Luke uses a word that he may have meant as a double *entendre*, a word with two meanings. That word is “first-born.” It means the first to open the womb, but to the Israelites it also designates the ruler. Used in the context of Christ’s birth, “first-born” concisely summarizes the prophecy of Isaiah: the Son of the virgin is God’s designated Ruler.⁵

The history of Jesus Christ is not a fable or a legend, it was not something that occurred “in a corner”⁶ or was shrouded in misty conjectures. Luke wants us to know the truth. The life of Jesus Christ is historical fact and occurred at a definite time marked by men and events that shaped the world of that day. In our reading, Luke dates the birth of Mary’s child as coinciding with a census ordered by the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus during the tenure of his official in Syria, Quirinius.⁷

¹ Luke 1:1

² Luke 1:3-4

³ Luke 3:1-2

⁴ Luke 1:26

⁵ Compare Isaiah 7:14 with 9:6-7

⁶ St Paul in defense of his ministry for Jesus Christ reminds King Herod Agrippa that the king is aware of these matters and they did not escape his notice “for this has not been done in a corner” Acts 26:26.

Agrippa was the nephew of King Herod Antipas (the king who had beheaded John the Baptist and tried Jesus hours before the Crucifixion). Agrippa was also the grandson of Herod the Great who reigned at the time of Jesus’ birth.

⁷ The date of this census has been debated by scholars. For examples of those pro and con the accuracy of Luke’s statements see, R. C. H. Lenski *The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg,

SYNTAXIS READING

Luke 2:1-7

Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This is the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

And all were proceeding to register for the census, everyone to his own city.

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David. In order to register, along with Mary, who was engaged to him and was with child.

And it came about that while they were there the days were accomplished for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her first-born son; and she wrapped him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

NOTES

Now it came about in those days

“Those days” refers to the time of the event that Luke has just been recording, the birth of John the Baptist. It was during that period that the following decree went out.

That a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth.

Caesar Augustus was the official emperor of the Roman Empire from 27 BC until AD 14. “All the inhabited earth” should be taken as hyperbole to indicate the lands dominated by the Roman Empire.

This is the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Galilee was part of the province of Syria at that time. There has been much discussion about this census and how it and the birth of Christ during the lifetime of Herod the Great might be reconciled. Most commentaries deal with this problem in their notes.⁸

And all were proceeding to register for the census, everyone to his own city.

According to Luke, the procedure used in this census was that of the provinces, not that of Rome. In the Roman system persons were recorded according to their place of domicile, but the Jews, being a people organized by tribes, registered at the city of their ancestors. This census in this province followed the Jewish custom. Part of Augustus’ success in general was his decision to allow his conquered provinces to retain as many of their customs as possible.

1946) pp. 116-117; and Joseph A. Fitzmeyer *The Gospel According to Luke (I-IX)* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1981) pp. 400-05.

⁸ See note 6 above.

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David.

Joseph was a direct descendent of King David.⁹ The ancestral home of King David was Bethlehem, a village near Jerusalem.

In order to register, along with Mary, who was engaged to him and was with child.

It has been observed that the Romans also included women in their census,¹⁰ but others have noticed that her accompanying Joseph also shielded Mary from the gossip of the town-folk of Nazareth¹¹ concerning the time of the birth of her child that fell short of what might be normally expected from the celebration of their marriage.

Mary, herself, was also a direct descendent of King David, but from a younger brother of David's son and successor. Her genealogy is found in Luke 3:23-38 and begins:

“And when He began His ministry, Jesus Himself was about thirty years of age, being supposedly the son of Joseph, the *son* of Eli, the *son* of Matthat . . .”

(Although the English reads “son of Eli,” in the Greek, the word “son” is missing. Eli is simply in the genitive, indicating family ties. “Son of Eli” should probably be translated “son-in law of Eli” in Joseph's case, while the rest of the genitives may be properly translated as “son of”.¹² Eli then is the father of Mary and she is a descendant of David's son Nathan by Bathsheba.) Joseph's own genealogy is found in Matthew 1:1-16 where he is begotten by Jacob, a descendant of David's son Solomon by Bathsheba. Therefore, Jesus had the legal right to the throne of Israel through his legal, though not natural, father, Joseph. That Mary was in the line of David fulfilled the promise to David that his own seed would be the eternal king.

“Who was engaged to him” simply means that Mary and Joseph had not consummated their marriage. The reader knows from chapter 1 that Mary was still a virgin though she carried the miraculous child in her womb.

And it came about that while they were there, the days were accomplished for her to give birth.

“There” is Bethlehem. It had been prophesied that the eternal King, the Messiah, would be born in Bethlehem.¹³ God's providence was such that he used the decree of a Gentile ruler to bring about the fulfillment of that prophecy.

And she gave birth to her first-born son;

“First-born” says nothing with respect to whether Mary later gave birth to other children. It simply indicates that she had not given birth to any other previously.

⁹ Matthew 1 gives the legal genealogy of Jesus Christ and traces Joseph's descent from David's son, King Solomon. There Matthew carefully breaks the pattern of father begetting son and simply says that Joseph is called the husband of Mary “from whom was born Jesus, Who is called Christ.” Matthew 1:16.

¹⁰ William Hendriksen *New Testament Commentary, Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978) p.142

¹¹ Lenski, p. 122.

¹² Luke may have used this ambiguous method of listing the connections between the generations to be grammatically consistent but allow for the exceptional interpretation when it came to Joseph and Eli.

¹³ Micah 5:2

‘First-born’ is also a title given the child designated as the one who inherited the right to rule in the family and receive for that purpose a double portion of the estate.¹⁴ Since this was normally the first son born, ‘first-born’ became the title for that position. Later when St. Paul refers to Christ as the “first-born of all creation,”¹⁵ he is not saying Christ was the first creature, but rather that Christ bears the title as ruler of all creation.

and she wrapped him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

It is interesting that Jesus, Who later refers to Himself as “the Bread of Life,¹⁶ was born in Bethlehem which literally means “house of bread” in Hebrew. His cradle was the food trough of animals”

This notice of the lowly circumstances of His birth underscores for the Christian the great contrast between our Lord’s former glorious state as God in heaven and His Incarnation.

APPLICATION

This reading was chosen to be read on this Sunday that we honor Mary. It is a record of the fulfillment of her important role in God’s great plan to save mankind. In her womb, the Eternal God took on the humanity of an embryo and, thus, the incarnate God, Jesus Christ, was in the fullness of time born to Mary. This happened in order that He might lay down His life to free us from the penalty we deserve for our sins. That the Eternal God would stoop down in this way is unimaginable, but He did.

The birth of the Incarnation marks the faithfulness of God to fulfill His promises that He made to representatives of mankind in other moments of time. These people were real, not legends or figments of poetic imagination and their encounters in moments of time with God were real. Moreover, the promises that He made to them He determined to keep.

The first of these representatives of mankind were Adam and Eve. In Genesis 3:15, God promised them a Savior to crush the head of their enemy who had lured them into disobedience and sin. This special Man to come was described in a unique way: He would be “the Seed of the woman.” Thousands and thousands of years later God’s promise was fulfilled—Jesus Christ was that Seed and Mary was that woman. On the Cross, Satan was fatally crushed by the Man; but in the process, just as God had foretold, the Savior was wounded as well.

In the course of time, God had also made a promise to a man later known as Abraham, the friend of God.¹⁷ “In you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”¹⁸ Abraham was chosen by God to found a new people that would bring forth the promised Man. That

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 21:15-17; see also Psalm 89: 27 in which God declares David “My first-born, the highest of the kings of the earth.”

¹⁵ Colossians 1:15. He is also called the first-born to “many brethren” or the children of God (Romans 8:29) and the first-born of the dead (Colossians 1:18) “That in all things He might have the preeminence.”

¹⁶ John 5:48

¹⁷ James 2:23; 2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8

¹⁸ Genesis 12:3

nation was Israel. This people, that God named His “First-born,”¹⁹ are the people of the woman, Mary, whose Seed is our Lord Jesus Christ, the great First-born, or the Supreme Ruler of the Universe. Because of Him, they have truly been a blessing for all mankind.

The second of Israel’s kings was David, whom God described as “a man after My heart who shall do all My will.”²⁰ To this king, God promised,

“When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, Who will come forth from you, and I will establish His kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of His kingdom forever.”²¹

The One Who rules eternally as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords today is the Seed of Mary, the descendent of David King who ruled over the people of Israel, the nation founded by Abraham.

The promises of God have been fulfilled and our reading marks the beginning of that fulfillment in the Incarnation. Thirty plus years later, Satan was crushed, but our Savior was wounded in the process. He was wounded for our transgressions, because of our sins. Nevertheless, He promised to rise again and that was fulfilled at the Resurrection. Our God is a faithful God. He keeps His promises.

Our Lord bears the title, First-born, a title that the ancient Israelites used to designate the one chosen to rule. Incredible as it may seem, the eternal God, the true First-born (or Ruler) over all creation, had no beginning and has no end. And yet in His Incarnation, this First-born became the first-born in a moment of time to His little handmaiden, Mary, in fulfillment of His promises to the representatives of mankind. That God had chosen her for that moment filled Mary’s soul with joy and her heart with praise.

Now, it was not only to Adam and Eve, Abraham and David that God made promises. He has made them to you and me. He has promised that if we turn to Him in repentance, trusting in Him, the victory won at the Cross will be ours. Our sins will be forgiven, He will make us His children, He will give us eternal life in His Presence, we will rule with Him, the First-born, and share all that He has because He loves us.

This offer is for us in this moment in time. May God help us to understand and appreciate that all the promises were made for us. May we, sinners like Adam and Eve, welcome God like His friend Abraham, serve Him with all our heart as did David, and finally with souls filled with joy and thanksgiving, like little Mary, worship our Savior forevermore.

¹⁹ Exodus 4:22

²⁰ 1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22

²¹ 2 Samuel 7:12-13