

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: A Savior Is Born
Service Theme: A Savior Is Born to Change the World

Sermon Theme: A Savior Is Born to You (December 24, 2022)
Luke 2:1-20

A little over 2,000 years ago, a child was born. A child who seemed to change the world. His father declared him to be the heir of all his glory and power. He would proclaim himself to be the savior of his people. And his followers would worship him as god. This child's name was--everyone say it with me...Octavian. Oh, you thought I meant someone else?

In his will, the great Julius Caesar legally adopted his great-nephew Octavian, and named him heir to his throne. At age 33, Octavian was the undisputed ruler of the world. During his reign as Rome's first emperor, Octavian built roads, elevated the empire to new heights, and produced a two-century era of peace, called the *Pax Romana*. And along the way, he picked up a fancy new name: Augustus. Caesar Augustus. Considered by many historians to be the greatest leader in history, we might look at Augustus Caesar and think, "Now there's a guy who changed the world." And in some ways, that's true.

But tonight, Caesar Augustus gets a little shoutout not to celebrate how much he changed the world, but for the oblivious bit part he played in the birth of the child who truly "changed the world;" who produced not just a "Peace of Rome," but "***on earth peace to those on whom [God's] favor rests.***"

It's likely that the Peace of Rome Augustus is famous for is what started the events we hear about in the Christmas Gospel in motion. To maintain peace in Rome, Caesar needed two things: money, and a strong military. So, "***In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world...and everyone went to their own town to register.***" This census served a

two-fold purpose: It got everyone registered so they could be taxed...money. And it let Augustus know how many fighting-aged men he had in the empire...military.

But 1,400 miles from Rome, in a little nothing town called Nazareth, a light bulb went on. Nearly 9 months before, an angel appeared to a young virgin named Mary with an unbelievable message: "***You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be called the Son of the Most High.***" As unfathomable as the promise was, that this young virgin would give birth to the Savior, the Son of God, Mary believed it.

But as she pondered this, one detail must have confused her. 400 years earlier, through the prophet Micah, God prophesied that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem—the little hometown of her and her fiancée Joseph's forefather, King David. But she lived in Nazareth. But as Caesar Augustus' decree spread throughout the Roman world, you can picture Mary patting her pregnant belly and saying with a smile, "We're going to Bethlehem."

So Joseph, Mary, and the in-utero Son of God set off on a 90-mile journey through arid desert, rising around 1,400 feet in elevation, until they reach Bethlehem. And "***While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.***"

If you're a history nerd like me, you might be eating this up with a spoon. But if you hate history, you might be thinking, "Caesar Augustus? Censuses? Quirinius governor of Syria? Why does any of this matter?" Whether you like studying history or not is completely your prerogative. But I think there are two really important reasons that God wants us to know that historical information.

First, God couches the Bible in history—because it is history! These events really happened. Fables and myths start with "Once upon a time, in a kingdom far far away," not discussions about the policies of historical, secular political leaders, and their impact on very real citizens of very real kingdoms. And God connects the Bible to secular

history in order to verify the Bible's authenticity. These are real events that happened to real people in real places.

But God is also letting us peek behind the curtain to see how he uses the details, events, and decisions of people in this world to carry out his plans and purposes. Caesar Augustus didn't believe in, or probably even know about the true God. He'd certainly never heard of Mary, Joseph, or Jesus. But God used Augustus's likely self-serving census to ensure that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, just as he'd prophesied and promised. Most people had no clue what would come from this census. But God did!

That gives us great comfort, because it means that God is using the circumstances and events of your life and this world for his perfect plans and purposes too. The decisions of political leaders--both the ones you'd call good, and bad; the challenges and curveballs life throws at you; the consequences of our own sins and mistakes, and the consequences we endure because of the sins and mistakes of others. Whether we realize it or not, God uses all of it to carry out his plans and purposes for the good of his kingdom, and for your spiritual good.

But if you just look at what Luke's Gospel says, this unknown baby born into a poor, lowly family hardly strikes us as someone whose birth changed the world. Compared to the great Emperor of Rome whose decree brought this baby to Bethlehem, it seems like no contest which would have a greater impact! That is, until you hear what an angel said about this child in the first Christmas sermon to a congregation of terrified shepherds.

While these shepherds kept a sleepy watch over their grazing flocks in the darkness of the fields outside Bethlehem, suddenly their eyes were opened wide, when ***“an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them.”*** And then the angel told them something that changes everything. ***“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”***

Did you catch it? **A Savior Is Born to You.** A Savior. One who saves from harm or danger. But in order for that to be a world changing message that ***“causes great joy for all the people,”*** we have to acknowledge that we need saving. If you're sitting in a kiddie pool with 6 inches of water, and someone grabbed you around the waist, and tried lifting you out of the pool shouting, “Don't worry! I'll save you!” you'd be more annoyed than joyful, right? Because you don't need saving.

So why do we need a Savior? A Savior from what? A Savior from sin. And death. And Hell. A lot of people would say they're pretty good. They try to show love and kindness to others. They care for their kids, and their families. They work hard at their jobs. They try to live a good life and haven't committed any major crimes. So many people don't think they really need a Savior—like they're in the kiddie pool of sin.

But when God created the perfect world, and its two perfect, holy inhabitants, his requirement and expectation wasn't for mankind to be “pretty good.” No, the perfect, holy God requires all people to ***“Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”*** Just one sin by Adam and Eve plunged the world into sin and all its painful consequences. And just one sin from us makes us imperfect—plunging us into the depths of eternal separation from our holy God. And not just without sin, like you've never committed a major felony or done jail time. God requires us to be perfect in thoughts, words, and actions. And if we're really honest, we're not sitting in the kiddie pool. We're drowning in the deepest depths of the ocean of sin! And that's true of me, of you, and of all people.

That's our reality, and as much as we try to convince ourselves that we're just fine, our hearts betray us. When the angel appears—not even God, but just one of his servants—the shepherds are terrified! And throughout Scripture, we see the same refrain. When sinful humans come into the presence of God or his angels, they're always terrified. Angels always have to say, ***“Do not be afraid.”*** Because deep down, we know we don't deserve anything from God but to be destroyed eternally.

But that's why the angel's message is one of "**good news that causes great joy for all the people.**" Because that child born in Bethlehem is the Savior of the world.

However, many people don't like thinking of Jesus as their Savior. They prefer to think of him more like a teacher, mentor, adviser, or life coach. Because if we treat Jesus like one of those, we can continue telling ourselves that we're fine; that all we need is a little advice and encouragement. And when God says something in his Word that we don't like, if he's just an adviser, you can take it to heart if it feels right, or just ignore it as another's opinion if you don't. A teacher can impart knowledge, but it's still up to the student to apply the learning and pass the test. So if we view Jesus as just our teacher, and not our Savior, we can keep focusing on ourselves; our feelings, our desires, our actions.

But if you're drowning in the deepest depths of the ocean, you don't need a lifeguard to whisper some advice on how to swim to safety. If you're trapped in a burning building, you don't need the firefighter to cheer for you, and encourage you to avoid the smoke and get out safely. No, you need the firefighter to hack the door down, drag your lifeless body out of the flames, and resuscitate you! You need a Savior!

We don't just need an adviser to tell us how to live better, or a life coach to encourage us to be better. We need a Savior to hack down the gates of hell, and carry us to Heaven. And that's why that baby in Bethlehem's manger changed the world. Because he is the Savior everyone needed.

Pastor Tim Keller has a great quote that so beautifully captures the truth of Christmas. "**The gospel says you are more sinful and flawed than you ever dared believe, but more accepted and loved than you ever dared hope.**" So sinful that only the coming of the Son of God could save us. But so incredibly loved, because he did come--for you!

The eternal Son of God, took on a mortal human nature. Hands that stretched out the sky at Creation now stretched out for his mother. The

Son of God became fully human, so he could be subject to the law he'd created, and keep it entirely as the perfect substitute for imperfect sinners. The Son of God became fully human, so he shed his blood and die on the cross to pay for our sins, in our place. The same body that was placed into a manger at Christmas, would be placed lifeless in a tomb, until the third day, when the same lungs that took their first breath outside the womb on Christmas, would once again fill up with air as he was raised from the dead, the full and certain proof that every sin of every person has been forgiven! A Savior is born to you!

To you. For all the people. That means this message of salvation through Jesus is for you—each and every one of you. Even if you're overwhelmed with shame and guilt over things you've done, or keep doing. Even if you avoid church because you feel ashamed to stand before God. Even if you put on airs to look good on the outside, but just to mask how broken you are inside. Whether you've been a Christian your whole life, or if this is the first time you've been inside a church. No matter how broken you feel, or how messed up your life has become. A Savior—YOUR Savior—is born to you. Because you, and me, and all of us are exactly the kind of people Jesus came to save.

The Peace of Rome didn't last forever. In fact, even during it, there wasn't true and lasting peace. But Jesus brings a peace that truly lasts forever. As the angels proclaimed, "**On earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.**" Peace through Jesus isn't peace from the absence of something. It's a peace that comes from the presence of something: Forgiveness, salvation, the love of God, a relationship with your heavenly Father. Because Jesus came to be your Savior, nothing can rob you of that peace. So even when life doesn't feel peaceful, because God's favor rests on you through Jesus, we have complete, unshakeable peace, no matter what.

Like the shepherds, leave tonight, telling others, glorifying and praising God for everything you've heard and seen. And don't stop after Christmas. Every day, glorify and praise him. Because a Savior has been born to you. For you. And that changes everything.