

Mystery Is God's Method!

CHRISTMAS TRUTHS

Luke 2:1-7

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Bethany Church

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I am fascinated. I'm not sure that I have learned more in any single Christmas season than this year. Not since I first heard the story of Christ's birth has Christmas revealed so much. That's because of four truths. They like seeds are growing within me and expanding my vision. The first Sunday of Advent we focused on timing. The message was *Timing Is Critical*. Most of us agree that timing is pivotal. However, do you agree that God is in charge of timing? That is a Christmas truth. Although God does not control everything and everyone, God is in charge of timing. Therefore, St. Paul observed, "*All things work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose*" (Romans 8:28). A second Christmas truth is that *Heaven's Not So Far Away*. Christmas reveals that a supernatural God is working supernaturally among us and for us. God is acting supernaturally on your behalf. A tremendous plan

that involves you is unfolding right now. Heaven's not so far away. Last week a new insight hit me. As I studied, I was convinced – this is not an assumption, it is a conclusion – that God gave you and me a snapshot of the holy moment that Jesus was conceived. An angel predicted it. Mary's cousin Elizabeth announced it, and immediately, in a common biblical pattern, the Spirit came on Mary. The power of the Most High overshadowed her as the angel had predicted; and as this young teenage girl spoke or sang her song to God and Elizabeth, our salvation, our savior, was conceived within her. How privileged we are to share this amazing moment with God and Mary! Mary realized and prophesied that her blessing was meant for sharing. The Christmas truth is that every divine blessing is meant for sharing; for God loves you and loves others through his love for you. Again, God loves others through his love for you. God loves you through his love for me. Blessings are for sharing. Today, your eyes will see things that they were unable to see before. Today, your expectations will grow because of another great Christmas truth.

In the Christmas story an emperor is named. Augustus. His rise to power was not automatic. His birth name was Caius Octavius, the same as his father. His father served as an attorney general for Rome . His great uncle was Julius Caesar, the emperor. Caesar adopted and educated young Octavius. When Octavius was only 19 years old, Julius Caesar was assassinated. It took another fifteen years for Octavius to become emperor as he slowly overcame political and military opposition. The name *Augustus* was given to him by the Roman senate. It carried the meaning of *the Reverend* or *the Venerable*.

If this great emperor's rise to power was anything but scripted and certain, how do you account for his actions that fulfilled prophecy? He knew nothing of Jewish prophecy, yet his census decree brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem in fulfillment of prophecy. How can that be anything other than accidental? How can God be at work in that? King Solomon wrote:

The king's heart is like a stream of water directed by the LORD; he turns it wherever he pleases. (Proverbs 21:1, NLT)

Solomon is not saying a king is a robot or pawn. He's not absolving leaders of their personal responsibility. He's not saying that everything we do is scripted by God. Instead, he gives us an amazing image. He compares a king's heart to a stream. Streams provide life wherever they go, wherever they carve a course. That's the power of the king. Whoever has a king's favor is blessed. Whoever angers a king suffers. Streams, however, are affected by their source and the contour of the land. Even though streams shape the contour, other forces can shape the contour and thus the stream. Earthquakes, volcanoes, rock slides, avalanches can all redirect a stream. In addition, the source is pivotal. It can cause the stream to flood and cut new channels. What is the source for the way a king thinks? Is not the source his family, friends, advisers and mentors? Is not the contour of the land that shapes him the events he experiences? Won't those things shape a king's thoughts and emotions? Won't they direct his actions? Can you see how God can direct a person, and yet the person makes up his own mind and is fully responsible.

One time when I was in Rapid City , South Dakota , I met a young man who had driven his motorcycle off a road in the Black Hills . He and the motorcycle plunged

down a 100 foot embankment. The motorcycle was totally destroyed, yet the man barely had a scratch. He knew his life was spared. He knew that his survival was nothing short of a miracle. Do you think that accident was a rock slide or an avalanche that can change the stream of a person's heart? I didn't know the man; but as I walked in a park, he was there. I was led by God to greet him and then ask him about his relationship with God. Do you know what he told me? I was the fourth person to talk with him about Jesus that day. Do you think God was altering the source of his stream and the contour of his land?

God can do that with any person and any leader. That's why we are called to pray. Our prayers invite that to happen. Don't think for a moment that God arbitrarily altered the source and contour of Augustus's stream, Augustus's heart. God was responding to the prayers of countless believers who prayed for the coming of a savior. God was answering the cries of his people, even as he once did when the Jewish people suffered slavery in Egypt . God's methods for answering those prayers, however, are mysterious. God's hand often is cloaked. God respects our dominion, our choices and actions, and yet he works his will.

Is it difficult to believe that God was working with Augustus despite his ignorance, or that God was working down stream with some of Augustus's officials who were implementing the census? Mary and Joseph had no idea that God was at work in this. Being forced to leave your home when you're about to give birth, does not seem compassionate. It seems out of character for God. It doesn't appear to be the thing God would have in mind. However, you must confess that despite the hazards, they were protected. God's love prevailed.

I recall what God said through the prophet Isaiah:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. 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 that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, 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.”
(Isaiah 55:8-11, NIV)

God said through Isaiah that you may not know how I am working, but be assured that I am working. God’s ways are beyond our discerning eyes. God’s ways are mysterious. Mystery is God’s method because he is so much greater.

Who knows if God had urged Joseph to take Mary earlier to Bethlehem ? Who knows if the hardship of traveling during pregnancy was caused by procrastination and not necessarily God’s will? Whatever the case, Augustus forced Joseph and Mary to be in Bethlehem when Jesus was born, and God’s purpose was accomplished. God’s love prevailed. God was meddling upstream for Joseph and Mary. He was affecting the source for their thinking and emotions and he was shaping the contour of their land with decrees by Augustus.

There are two interesting side notes to the story with Augustus. We do not know the exact date of Jesus’ birth. However, during the period, a prophecy surfaced that a great person was about to be born. It is believed to have gained notoriety in Rome at that time. Secondly, Augustus did something very rare. In Rome the doors of the Temple of Janus stood open as long as there was war and strife. However, during this period that

the Prince of Peace was born, possibly the exact day, Augustus shut the temple of Janus . That signified to Romans and all others the arrival of universal peace. What made him do it? No one really knows. However, remember Solomon's words about God and the hearts of kings. We have a great God.

The Christmas truth goes beyond the story of Augustus. It moves us to the birth of a peasant. God planted in our world the salvation of all in a baby. No chariots of fire came. No earthquakes shook. No armies marched. Simply, a baby was born. That's how salvation visited this earth. It came unobtrusively in seed form. God's salvation for us would unfold as a baby grew to manhood and as that man ministered, suffered and died for us.

Jesus often talked how God's rule or kingdom was like seed that took root and grew. Jesus taught about God's words as seed that is sown and over time produces fruit. The seed works hidden from our eyes, yet it produces life for us. Jesus revealed that you and I are soil for God's seed. When he plants it in us, there may be no great change. Yet its birth, growth and maturity, unnoticed by others, change us and the world through us. Mystery may be God's method, but love is God's motive, and redemption is God's purpose.

God has been planting seeds in you. Have you've been receptive or hostile? You were made in the image of God. God respects your decisions, but he's meddling with you upstream to affect your heart. He's already use a baby in a manger to affect you. Do you want him to plant more? Will you be receptive soil? He loves you. Welcome his work.