



As we continue with our theme of *Building*, today, on Christmas day, we consider the topic of *Building Christmas*. Perhaps *Rebuilding Christmas* would be a more appropriate title, as Christmas has been remade, rebuilt, and repurposed into something very different from the birth of Jesus in a stable in Bethlehem. Christmas, as we often note, has become so busy, so commercialized, and so far removed from its origin that we sometimes struggle to recognize it as a holiday that celebrates the central act of God's redemptive work with humankind. And sometimes we find ourselves as active participants in the repurposing of Christmas. I wonder if God will say to me one day in eternity, *you know when you talked about the simplicity and humility of the first Christmas? You had that right, so why did you help to make it so complicated?*

I should add that I am not at all a scrooge when it comes to our modern Christmas. I watch the Hallmark Channel movies, I go to the malls, and I enjoy giving and receiving gifts. I like a nicely decorated tree (and I don't even mind our Yoda tree topper, light saber and all), but I do, at times, wonder about what seems to be the rebuilding of Christmas into something it was never intended to be. As C. S. Lewis once wrote, *once in our world, a stable had something in it that was bigger than our whole world*. Lewis was right – Christmas is far, far bigger than what is often made of it. Too often, our modern version of Christmas is an impoverished version.

Our Scripture text for this morning is a portion of the most well-known Advent passage, Luke 2:1-7.

1 And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.

2 (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)

3 And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)

5 To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

6 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

7 And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

This morning, I want to think of *Building Christmas* in relation to three themes, themes that are taken from three phrases in this passage of Scripture –

1. *And it came to pass...*

I often feel a measure of guilt about looking forward to the Christmas season coming to an end. Does anyone else feel that way? Sometimes, it seems as though Advent is an endurance contest more than a spiritual experience. It is a very tiring time in the life of a minister, I can assure you that. Sometimes, on days when I feel very tired, I hold to the Biblical admonition of *this too shall pass*.

It is then that I like to turn to what is one of my favorite verses in all of the Biblical passages relating to the birth of Christ – the first phrase of Luke 2:1 – *and it came to pass*. That verse presents to us not only an important reminder of an historical fact, but also of a promise yet to come. It tells us of the reality of the birth of Jesus, but it also reminds us that the plans of God do come to pass; they do take place; they do happen. It is God's assurance that all of his promises will come to pass.

This verse carries an important message for all of those who have any doubts about God's promises coming to fruition, and there are certainly many in our world who are skeptics not only about God's promises, but of God himself.

Several years ago I read a fascinating book – *The Fingerprints of God: What Science Is Learning About the Brain and Spiritual Experience* by Barbara Bradley Hagerty. Some of the questions she ponders in the book are questions often asked by researchers – why are some people more attuned to spiritual matters than others? Why is it that some people have an innate interest in spirituality while others never seem to think about anything spiritual? They are interesting questions, but I'm not sure they are ones that science can answer.

Undoubtedly, we live in a time of some measure of skepticism about spiritual matters. In our modern era it seems as though that skepticism feeds upon itself, growing more prevalent as more people express skepticism. Unfortunately, some of those skeptics will claim that if we have any doubts or and questions about our faith there is something deficient in our faith. These skeptics will point to those doubts and questions as evidence – in their minds, at least – of a loss of faith. But we all ask questions and we all, at times, have doubts, and there is nothing wrong with doubts or questions. In fact, I would say that doubts and questions are signs of a living and vibrant faith, because if they are signs of taking faith and its implications seriously. I would also add that doubts and questions do not have an impact upon God's fulfillment of his promises. To assume that they do is to make the mistake that reality is based upon what we believe, what we can prove through evidence, or by what we can feel (these are a few of the mistakes of skeptics). If one does not believe in God, for instance, one would then claim God must not exist. But the existence of God is not predicated upon what one believes, because our beliefs do not alter reality. Similarly, if one cannot produce irrevocable proof – absolute, can't miss proof – of God's existence, then one would claim that God must not exist. But again, reality does not conform to what we can either prove or disprove by evidence. And, finally, if one does not *feel* God's presence or *feel* the reality of his existence, then one would conclude that God must not exist. But, once again, reality is not dependent upon what we feel.

When I attended seminary I was put through the rigors of considering, examining, and defending my faith. It was a difficult process for me and one that required me to think very seriously about what I believed. One of the conclusions to which I arrived was that the existence of God, and God's promises, were not predicated at all upon what I believed. God's existence, and his promises were either true or they were not true, regardless of what I thought or believed. It was not up to me to make a case for their reality, but to choose whether or not I would accept their reality. Obviously, I chose to accept those realities, and continue to do so. I believe very strongly that reality is true whatever we believe, or don't believe, and this verse reminds us that God not only exists, but he guarantees that his promises will come to pass.

And it came to pass is testimony to a reality that is true not because of what we feel or what we believe, but what *is* true, and that is the truth of God's reality, and the truth that he entered into his own creation.

2. *And all went to be taxed...*

If *it came to pass* is one of my favorite verses, this is one of my least favorite, because I am like everyone else and I complain about paying taxes.

When our children were young, Tanya and I opened a tax business. It was quite a surprise to me that we had our own business, because I had never envisioned myself as an entrepreneur. While it was a good experience, I learned that I did not have the mind of a tax preparer. Tanya is very good with business and numbers, while I am not. Preparing tax returns was easy for her. She enjoyed working with numbers and could get them done quickly, which was important during the peak of the tax season. I approached tax preparation much differently. For me, it was an opportunity to engage in pastoral care. I sat with clients and talked with them about their lives, listened to their problems, and offered counsel. Sometimes, Tanya reminded me that I was there to prepare tax returns, not to be a marriage or family counselor.

But what I like about the phrase *and all went to be taxed* is this – for all the ways in which the powers of the world believe they dictate the destiny of the world, they do not. Caesar Augustus might have decreed that the world was to be taxed, but Caesar was not the ultimate authority. Where is Caesar now? Where is the mighty Roman Empire now? Caesar and the Roman Empire that not only ruled the world but also sought to vanquish the church are long gone. The other empires that sought to vanquish the church are no more.

Psalm 2:1-4 tells us –

1 *Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain?*

2 *The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed, saying,*

3 *“Let us break their chains and throw off their shackles.”*

4 *The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them.*

There are certainly consequences to the decisions of the rulers and the kingdoms of this world, but that does not mean they have the ultimate power, the ultimate control, or the ultimate destiny. Their decisions can have very serious consequences and that is why we, as God’s people, should always stand apart from the powers of this world and serve as a voice for the voiceless, as an advocate for those who have no advocate, and a voice for justice when there is no justice. But let it be known that God is in control. The Romans might have decreed that all were to be taxed and must return to their own towns, but God decreed that the actions of the Romans would be part of his instrument for how he would enter into the world. While the Romans decreed power, God decreed love. Even today, in Aleppo, where Assad’s regime decrees ruthless power, God decrees love. Everywhere and in every time, God declares love.

3. *And laid him in a manger...*

It’s an amazing thought to imagine God in a manger as a tiny, helpless infant. As one writer put it, *God became not just the author of the human drama but an actor in it.*

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/23/opinion/humanizing-jesus.html?smid=nytcore-ipad-share&smprod=nytcore-ipad&r=0>

There is nothing else in the history of humanity that even comes close to matching the story of Jesus. There are so many deeply theological ways to attempt to explain that story and in college and seminary I waded through many of those explanations. I read the systematic theology and grappled with the depths of the explanations, but there is one story that helps to explain it better than perhaps any other. Some of you will remember Paul Harvey’s *The Rest of the Story*. Some of you will hear me mention Paul Harvey and think I must really be old. That may be the case, but in one of his broadcasts he tells a story that very clearly explains the nature of the Incarnation.

The story goes as follows – a mother and her children were preparing to attend the Christmas Eve

service at their church. The father was not going, as he never attended the service or any church service. To him, the idea of church was silly, filled with silly beliefs for which he had no time or tolerance. After his wife and children left for the service, it began to snow. Very quickly the snow turned into quite a storm, with the wind blowing and the snow falling and quickly becoming deep. As he watched out the window at the snow he looked in the direction of a barn near their house. A light on the front of the barn illuminated a scene that grabbed his attention. Struggling with the wind and the snow was a group of birds, searching for shelter. After watching them for several minutes, the man had an idea for how to help them. His idea was to go outside and open the door of the barn, allowing the birds to fly to the shelter of the barn. Though it seemed like a reasonable plan, it didn't work as he hoped. When he opened the door, the birds continued to fly around outside of the barn, struggling against the wind and the snow. The man ran around, waving his arms, hoping that would corral them into shelter. Once again, his plan did not work; in fact, it seemed to make matters worse. Standing in the snow and the wind, frustrated at his lack of success, he thought to himself, *if only I could become a bird, like one of them. If I were one of them I could lead them to safety, shelter, and security.* At that moment it suddenly occurred to him – that was the nature of the Incarnation. This is exactly why God had become part of his creation. Go become one of us in order to lead us, to bring us to safety, and to save us.

That, indeed, is that nature of the Incarnation and the reason why Jesus was *laid in a manger*. As we celebrate Christmas today, let us commit ourselves anew to the message of Christmas, and proclaim the good news that Christ has come!