

In this holy season we join in asking the question: *"Why lies He in such mean estate Where ox and ass lately fed?"* My fellow sinners we all know the answer quite well. As shameful as it is, we know our Lord Jesus even as a baby was our holy Substitute. Since He came to take our place, He had to descend to our deep and dark level from His eternal throne on high. But being placed in a manger would not be the lowest depths of His substitutionary work for us. The depth would eventually be reached when nailed upon the cross for our sins.

At least in the manger His shame was wrapped in swaddling clothes and His mother was there able to tend to His every need. But not so on the cross. There He was fully exposed in our naked shameful, His loving mother looking on with tears unable to make her Son comfortable. And worse yet, He would be abandoned and forsaken by His heavenly Father as He turned away from the One who was made to be sinner for us all. Then the question could be asked: *"Why hangs He in such mean estate Where criminals go to die?"*

From infancy to full maturity our Substitute entered upon our mean estate to set us free from it forever and win for us an eternal home in the eternal lap of luxury. Let us consider His lowliness and our exaltation by using Hymn #142, please rise.

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

Lord Jesus, born into our world at the fullness of time, *You rule over time. You created it. You are not bound by it. You stretch out Your hands and reach from the world's beginning to its end. You have the same power over what has been as You have over what will come. They are both that close to You. In Your kingdom no one counts the*

days. You Yourself have stepped into time in order that we would be able to step into eternity. It is more than anything we could thank You for, and yet it is only a small part of everything You have done for us. Praise be to Your name in everlasting eternity. Amen. (cf. To Live with Christ: Daily Devotions, Bo Giertz, CPH, 2008, p. 79)

In Christ Jesus, the Child born for us in Bethlehem in those days of Caesar Augustus and Quirinius the Governor, dear fellow redeemed:

“When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.” With these words St Paul underscores how St. Luke makes a point in his inspired account of the Christ’s birth to set it squarely into human history. We do well then to observe something we read over quickly without perhaps much thought: **God Acts in “Those Days” Always Impacting These Our Days Today.**

I

“Coincidence” and “happenstance” are not part of the vocabulary describing God’s oversight of the crown of His creation, the human race. As we often observe: “all things work together for good” for us who love Him as our one and only Savior God. He controls all things for our good, not just here in time, but for all eternity. Be assured what happens here in time is carefully crafted and implemented by Him for our welfare. In Romans Paul observes: “at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly.”

There are many lists assembled by Christian theologians over the millennia detailing why in their humble opinion God considered this time of Caesar Augustus to be the fullness of time for His Son to enter our world. But as fun as it is to list them and perhaps even imagine more, it is unnecessary. We rejoice that in His great wisdom and abundant grace God chose to send the Christ, our Jesus, into our world when, where and how He did. We know and trust that His timing was perfect in every way.

The staging area was set by our Lord – Bethlehem; the family was well chosen – the lineage of David; the virgin Mary was called upon by grace to be the holy vessel in which Christ, the Lord, would be born. From eternity these decisions were in the works and carried out with precision. God even used the unbelieving world through its emperor to bring about here in time what was planned from eternity.

In those days God acted according to His divine plan for our salvation. History may have not been a subject that interested you much. On the other hand you may have been an avid reader of

history and perhaps still are. A fun game avid historians may like to play is the *"What if ... Game"*. What if things had turned out differently? - battles won or lost; discoveries made or left uncovered; conceptions and births having occurred or thwarted. Hypothetically all sorts of scenarios can be imagined. But God knows nothing of such games we may like to play. All things work together for good regardless how bad they may seem at the time or to the reviewer of human history. God makes sure of it – for you and the whole Church.

As they traveled during her ninth month, do you think Mary and Joseph would have wished for the decree to take effect a couple years later? Do you think the Shepherds wished the announcement had come during the day instead of at night when going into town seemed so inopportune? Possibly, but these were all believers in a gracious God like you believe. You trust in God's timing knowing it has divinely gracious intent and always remains perfect.

II

Think of how this historical accounting brings us such joy this morning and has for Christians over two millennia. How God acted in those days truly impacts us to this day. The angelic announcement speaks to our generation today: "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born **this day** in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." It is good news, not just for all the people living at that time, but for those who already lived: Adam, Eve, Abraham, Sarah and for those who would yet come to live: your grandparents, parents, you, your children, grandchildren. "All people" means "all people".

It is to us and all people past, present and future that the Babe was born in the city of David that night to be the Anointed Lord who was sent to save us all. To underscore how big of an announcement this was – historical beyond proportion, all encompassing in nature, the lone angel surrounded by the glory of God shining all around, we are told a multitude of the angelic host responded to what probably left the shepherds dumbfounded. They sang out: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" Again it was not restricted to the pastures outside Bethlehem, but for the entire earth. What happened in those days truly reaches out beyond space and time and comes to us bringing us everlasting peace with God.

God made flesh was born. He was born to die, die in your place, to make payment for all your sins. Your Lord does not leave this as a mere fact from history, but continues to come to you today. He finds you right here and right now through Word and Sacrament

giving you of Himself for your forgiveness, life and salvation. What happened in those days still impacts you to this day.

This song so impressed the shepherds that night that perhaps when they “returned glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard” they sang among themselves *“Glory to God in the Highest”*. As a part of Mary’s pondering after the shepherds’ visit this song was very likely passed on to become a song of the Church sung weekly. To this day when Lutherans hear the words of absolution, that all their sins are forgiven by God unconditionally on account of His love for us in His Son, we break forth with the angelic song: *“Gloria in excelsis Deo!”* This song has reverberated down through the millennia demonstrating the impact of this birth in those days when a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered for the sake of taxation. This song is not in response to a demand placed upon us, but in response to an announcement of peace and salvation still in effect for you today. God acted then, so that He might continue to act among you now. Glory to God in the Highest – then, now and forever! Amen.