



Roanoke, Virginia

December 10, 2023

“Jesus’ Birth Certificate: (Date)”

Advent Sermon Series Part II

Luke 2:1-7

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2 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3All went to their own towns to be registered. 4Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Your sermon last week, George, made me curious about my birth story. So, I asked my mom what she remembered about the day I was born.

The first detail my mom recalls about that day is that my dad wore a pink shirt to the hospital; they had yet to find out my biological gender. My mom said that when the nurse came in to check on her and the baby (me), she said that the heartbeat is fast and turned to my dad and said, “Your shirt may be accurate.” Even though my dad was wearing a pink shirt, and they were already prepared to call me Katie, both my mom and dad claimed they knew it was a boy.



My mom said she remembers how excited she was to hold me—and that my dad was not as scared as he was when they had my older brother Jamie. Jamie brought me a plastic horse and was very confused as to why I couldn't hold it. And that is about all she told me. Oh, and I was born at night. That's all she said.

Then it got me thinking about the things I remember about the day Camden was born—and I'll have to admit, it did not start off on the right foot. This is a story not many people know—

Valerie got up in the middle of the night to use the bathroom, and, well, I was still sound asleep. Valerie yelled for me around 1:30 a.m., and I sprang to my feet to see what was happening. She said something to the effect of: "It is time." And the next thing I knew—I woke up lying on the hallway floor, with my feet sprawled between the bathroom counter and door. Yep, as soon as she told me Baby Camden was coming—I fainted. I woke up very confused, and after a brief look to make sure I was ok, Valerie said, "You better get it together. Go back to sleep and I will wake you up in 2 hours."

We made it to the hospital around 4:30 a.m., and we welcomed Camden into the world at 5:11 p.m. It was St. Patrick's Day; Taylor Swift was playing; there were lots of tears and lots of joy!

It is always interesting to hear what details we remember and share about birth stories.

If we could not recall the exact date of a particular event, we could follow the flow of Luke's narrative and provide the names of public officials at the time because this would be something that was historically documented. So, I was born in 1988...can anyone recall who was president? Ronald Reagan, who was president from 1981 until 1989. And can anyone recall who was governor of South Carolina in 1988? Carroll Campbell, who was governor from 1987 until 1995.

If in my birth story the only evidence of its date was the fact that Ronald Reagan was president and that Carroll Campbell was governor of South Carolina, my date of birth could be anytime their terms in office overlapped, anytime between 1987 and 1989.

Perhaps Luke is trying to offer a date in time by providing us with similar historical details. Let's take a closer look at the details provided by Luke. Luke tells us, "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria." So, according to Luke, Caesar Augustus was emperor of Rome when Jesus was born. Augustus was emperor from 27 BCE until his death in 14 CE. The census or registration was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. This is a good detail, but this is where the first difficulty comes. Quirinius didn't officially serve as governor of Syria until 6 CE, at which time he did conduct a census of Judea. This is likely the census referred to in Acts 5:37. So, Luke is aware of this later census, which is likely why in Luke's gospel he notes



it was the “first” one.¹ But if Quirinius didn’t serve as governor until 6 CE, then our initial assumption is that Jesus was born between 6 CE and 14 CE.

Fortunately, we have another gospel that offers insight. Matthew dates the birth of Jesus “during the time of King Herod.” This is Herod the Great, not to be confused with his son, Herod Antipas, the one who had John the Baptist killed. Herod the Great died in 4 BCE.

Comparing the two birth narratives, we see that the dating does not line up. Some say that Luke made a mistake in who was governor at the time. The governor of Syria before King Herod’s death was a man named Quintilius, who held the position from 6 until 4 BCE. So, Luke simply made a mistake or a typo. Possible, but not likely.

It could be that the word “while” is better translated as “before”—so the registration happened *before* Quirinius was governor of Syria. Maybe.

Another theory to reconcile this issue is looking deeper into the role Quirinius played as a Roman official, as he held a variety of roles in the Roman Empire, from soldier and senator to military commander and governor.

And the word for “governor” used in Luke’s gospel can be translated as *governing, leading, or commanding*. So, this may not be a specific title here; rather it could denote that Quirinius was exercising authority, “governing” in some capacity.² Another thought is that Quirinius actually served in this role twice. This notion is based on an inscription found on a tombstone that is said to be his that states the deceased was “Twice Legate” of Augustus in Syria.³ This then would place his first post as governor after Quintilius in the year 4 BCE, while Herod was still alive.

Ok. That was a lot. I hope you are following me through all of this.

Let’s recap: Caesar Augustus was Emperor from 27 BCE until his death in 14 CE. We know Herod the Great died in 4 BCE. We also know that Quintilius served as governor from 6 until 4 BCE, at such time Quirinius could have succeeded him within that same year.

So, after all of this, we can land on the year 4 BCE as the year of Jesus’ birth.

Phew—But we can’t be certain. It is most probable that Jesus’ birth took place sometime between 6 and 4 BCE, because according to Matthew, Herod was alive long enough to conduct a search for Jesus, await the report of the magi, and consequently issue the killings of boys under 2 years old. All of which would take some time.

¹ *New Interpreter’s Bible*, Luke 2:1-7, 62.

² Andrew E. Steinmann, *From Abraham To Paul: A Biblical Chronology*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 239.

³ Much of this research came from an article Bryan Windle wrote for *Bible Archaeology Report*, titled, “Quirinius: An Archaeological Biography” December 19, 2019. Accessed 12/10/23. <https://biblearchaeologyreport.com/2019/12/19/quirinius-an-archaeological-biography/>



However, as I have said, we do not have sufficient evidence within scripture, historical documents, and/or astrological data to precisely pinpoint the year Jesus was born, let alone the actual day of the year. A sermon about December 25th can wait.

But why does this all matter. Or does it even matter?

The historical data and scriptural evidence we have claim that Jesus was born, born here on earth, born the Human One.

There is far more here, and it is far bigger than a story of a baby being born. We cannot keep Jesus as a simple and helpless baby, always praying like NASCAR legend Ricky Bobby. The search for historical facts of who, what, when, where, and how can sometimes draw us away from the point of such proclamation. The birth narrative in both gospels is bigger and bolder!

Jesus' historical birth pulls us into the narrative of the cosmic hope for history.

Jesus was born when Caesar Augustus was Emperor, who brought about a season of peace to the Roman Empire, known as the *Pax Romana*. To this, Jesus was born Savior and Prince of Peace, and the angels proclaimed to the shepherds, “Do not be afraid; I am bringing good news of great joy for *ALL* people... Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on *EARTH* peace among those whom he favors!”

Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great, who, backed by Rome, had established himself as king by military conquest of his “own” people, and his slaughter of the innocent was a ruthless attempt to maintain power. To this, Jesus was born King of kings and Lord of lords, as he showed his power through service and his might through mercy.

Jesus was born when Quirinius was governor of Syria and was charged with conducting the registration, a symbol of Roman authority and oppression. To this, Jesus was born as the Messiah who would overthrow the powerful and lift up the oppressed.

In those days, Jesus was born, period. Against and amid all that was happening in the world at that particular time, Jesus was born, born into this world, born into a family, born into a community, born into human history.

Why does the date of Jesus' birth matter? Because we see in it that Jesus the Christ was born into a world of tyranny, inequality, and pride. Born to be a light in that darkness. A world and darkness we also know all too well.



Richard Rohr says it like this: The power of the biblical proclamation is that it clearly invites us into cooperation, free participation, and the love of all God's people.⁴ It is in Jesus' historical birth, that the one universal mystery of Divine Incarnation is also intended for us.⁵

We are invited to see Jesus as more than a historical figure confined to a specific time and place. Rather, Christ is a cosmic and eternal reality, always being born in the depths of our existence.

Beloved, as we celebrate Christmas, we acknowledge the ongoing incarnation of God's love in our world, inviting us to participate in the divine dance of creation and redemption. Jesus Christ is the birthing of creation, a birthing that includes us, right here, in this time and place. Jesus invites us into the time-bound and personal level of life; Christ invites us into the incarnational reality beyond time and space, and even life itself.⁶

Both the church, as the Body of Christ, and the world, into which the Body of Christ is born, are both forever in a season of Advent, waiting for hope to be born over and over again, waiting for a birthing of love into greater unity,⁷ as we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus, come."

In those days, the Word became flesh and lived among us... In these days, the Word becomes flesh and lives among us... Right now, the Word is flesh and lives within us. And we have seen his glory... We see his glory... the glory of Divine Love... by which all the world receives grace upon grace. Then, now, and forevermore.

Amen.

⁴ Daily Meditation, Dec. 7, 2021. "Mystical Hope: The Christ Mystery" <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/the-christ-mystery-2021-12-07/>

⁵ In a reflection on *The Continual Incarnation* for Christmas Day, 2016, Richard Rohr speaks of the "God-All-Vulnerable" as Emmanuel, God-with-us.

⁶ Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ*. 20.

⁷ Phrasing from Ilia Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution, and the Power of Love* (Orbis Books: 2013), 198.

