

Tonight, we begin our midweek Advent Series on the *Landscapes of Christmas*. My hope is that as we take in the scenery of Christmas, stopping along the way to ponder its significance, you will come to better appreciate the words of St. Paul when he wrote, “But when the *fullness of time* had come, God sent forth His Son”. In the “fullness of time”, we are told, which is to say that the world’s stage had been perfectly set for the arrival of our Savior. Our God is not a God of chance. There is no such thing as coincidences. God uses the events of history to reveal His providential plan of action. St. Luke alludes to this fact by framing his Christmas story like this: “And it came to pass in those day that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.” Now, St. Luke could have begun his birth narrative in any number of ways, but he chose instead to begin his account by referencing the political environment. In doing so, he joined seamlessly together what we are never supposed to talk about: Religion and Politics. But when you stop and think about it, what else is there to talk about. Aristotle called us “political animals” for a reason. We are by nature social creatures, we live in community, we exist in relationship with others. It is not good for man to be alone, and man becomes man among others, living in a society governed by laws and customs. Given the state of our fallen, sinful nature, government is a necessary evil to curb our appetites, to balance self-interest with communal interest, and provide a measure of safety for its citizens. Had we not fallen into sin, though, political authority would not have existed, and it only now exists to establish and sustain an earthly peace, which allows us to live the best life possible after the Fall. But the world’s peace is a flimsy peace, and had sin not entered the world, a peace beyond our understanding would have prevailed upon this earth. Circumstances being what they are, unfortunately, we must submit to governing authorities for the good of all. Christ being fully man was no different. From his first breath, He was a man under the authority of Caesar Augustus. This powerful secular figure issued a decree, which inadvertently set in motion the events of Christmas. The holy family was forced to endure the rigors of an eighty-mile journey because Caesar had decreed that all the world should be registered in their own hometown.

Seeing how they were descendants of King David this meant a trip to Bethlehem. This imperial census had a dual purpose. The most obvious reason was taxation. Accurate numbers meant accurate taxes, which would have been necessary to sustain the massive Roman Empire. But there was another reason for the decree. At this time, many men were choosing the carefree life of a bachelorhood rather than what they called the tedium of

married life. Men of action were devolving into men of leisure, living promiscuous and scandalous lives. This was of course not good for the stability of the nation, as a whole. In an effort to incentivize his citizens, Augustus passed legislation, which favored the married man and penalized the single man. The census would have been one way for him to gauge the success of his new social experiment. And so, to Bethlehem they traveled. But even their travel had a hint of politics to it. For such a journey would not have been possible just a few years before. Local riots and rebellions, bandits, and general unrest would have reduced the likelihood of safe passage for any traveler. But Augustus had changed all of that. Never before, and probably never again, had the world experienced such a capable overseer. Even to this day, Augustus is regarded as one of the most competent rulers of history. Rome, and all its provinces, were experiencing a time of great peace known as the *Pax Romana*. The world was at peace, and it was richly rewarded for it. Art and literature blossomed, religion and culture flourished.

The world had never seen an empire like Rome, this is true, but let us end this evening by narrowing our focus to the politics of the Promised Land. For at the same time Caesar was ruling the Roman Empire, Herod the Great was governing Palestine. We know from Scripture that Herod the Great was a brilliant tactician, able to play both sides to his advantage—one moment using his religious connections to curry favor; the next moment using his political connections—all in an effort to rebuild the Kingdom of Israel to roughly the same size it had been when David and Solomon ruled the United Empire. Herod did much to better the lives of his citizens. But he had a dark side. His ambition made him ruthless, suspicious, maniacal. Many within his own home were put to death because he suspected them of conspiring against him. He murdered countless others to protect his own power. If you recall, it was Herod the Great's heinous plan to kill the newborn king Jesus that led to the merciless slaughter of all male children two years old and under. Soon after Christ was born the volatile relationship between Rome and Palestine began to break apart; so much so that by 70 AD the Romans descended on Jerusalem and destroyed the great city and temple. But all these things happened in the order and sequence God determined. The peace between Rome and Palestine was necessary for Christ's birth and ministry, the animosity between Rome and the Jewish ruling class was a necessary catalyst for Christ's death. In retrospect, it's easy to see how God moved history. How nothing was left to chance. God had a reason for everything that happened, and that

reason, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, is you and me—for us men, and our salvation, Christ came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and was made man. Amen.