

**The Mystery at the Manger:
What Power Has He?
Luke 2:1-7**

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On the 21st day of December in the year of our Lord 2003, when George Bush was President of the United States and Phil Bredeson was Governor of Tennessee and Ann Dunn was Mayor of Brentwood, the people of Brentwood United Methodist Church gathered to worship Jesus Christ, the newborn King. Somebody is surely thinking so what, why all the details?

A similar question might be asked of Dr. Luke as he opens the narrative of Jesus Birth. *“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone went to his own town to register.”* So what, why all the details? Who wants to talk about emperors, governors, and a census when we can marvel at the angelic visitation to the shepherds?

Yet on this Sunday before Christmas, I say slow down, we move too fast. Dr. Luke takes the time to set the birth of Jesus in a particular time and a certain place. The story begins with “In those days” not “Once upon a time” as if it were a nursery rhyme. The contrast between Caesar Augustus and the firstborn son of Mary, lying in a manger, is staggering to ponder and critical to consider.

What is power? Who has it? How are we to handle it? Behind this cute little story of Christmas is a Star Wars struggle of the universe. Maybe it's time to realize where power lies, and straighten it out in our mind. When Caesar Augustus ruled the world, Christ the Savior was born.

Contrast the Power of Position VS. the Power of a Person

Caesar Augustus was Gaius Octavius the adopted son of Julius Caesar who reigned as absolute monarch over the Roman Empire for 45 years. During Octavian's reign, Rome came to rule the world from Western Europe to Iraq. Roads were built. Arts abounded; literature exploded. Some said this man found Rome a brick and left her a marble. He brought in the *Pax Romana* – the Roman peace that not only conquered the world but gave it law and order as well. So he was given the name Augustus, the holy one. On an island in the Mediterranean they erected a monument on which were inscribed these words “Caesar Augustus, the savior of the world.”

When Caesar Augustus was emperor of Rome, Christ our Savior was born. He was born in another man's stable; laid in another man's manger. He preached from another man's boat; rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey. He ate His last supper in a borrowed upper room, and He died on another man's cross to pay for another man's sins. He was buried in another man's tomb. He never had a family or owned a home; He never wrote a book or held an office. He didn't even leave a great number of followers.

But everywhere He went the powers of darkness were defeated, people were healed, relationships were restored, people came alive to God and alive to each other. All the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that ever sailed; all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned put together have not affected the lives of people on this earth as powerfully as this one solitary life.

Maybe it is time to realize real power lies not in a position but in a person committed to a mission. Give someone a Ph.D. and a professorship and we assume they can teach, but position does not guarantee that the power is there. We lay our hands on a person to ordain them and appoint them to a church assuming we have empowered them to pastor a congregation. Effective pastoring is more about a person than it is about a position. Today one third of the world claims Jesus Christ as Savior, while Caesar Augustus fills a few pages of history.

Contrast the Power of Force VS. the Power of Faith

Here at Christmas it is time to realize where power lies, to straighten it out in our minds. A certain driver was pulled over for speeding. When the officer asked for his driver's license he said he didn't have one due to a DUI. When asked for the registration, the man said it wasn't his car. It belonged to the woman whose body he put in the trunk after he shot her with the pistol in the glove compartment. In a matter of seconds the man was surrounded by a whole host of police. "Let me see your driver's license." He handed it to the captain. The captain asked for the car registration. He handed it to the captain. He opened the glove box and there was no gun. He opened the trunk and there was no body.

Finally the captain lowered his gun and said, "The officer who pulled you over told me you didn't have a license, you were driving a stolen car, with a gun in the glove box and a body in the trunk." The man looked the captain in the eye and said, "Yeah, and I bet he told you I was speeding too!"

We should be grateful for the strong arm of the law. They keep our communities safe and our roads passable. I am glad they arrest drunken drivers whatever their celebrity status may be. Thanks to them we can live and move and go our merry way without fear. There are some things the law cannot do:

- 1) The law cannot force people to love one another.
- 2) The law cannot force people to open their hearts and pocketbooks and be generous with those in need.

- 3) The law cannot force the healing of our diseases, nor solve our sorrows nor comfort our broken hearts.
- 4) What the law tried to do by restraining power from without, the Gospel does by inspiring power from within. Laws can make us civil but only love will make us Christian.

A Palestinian baby found abandoned at birth in a roadside heap of trash was rescued by Palestinian doctors, nurtured by a group of nuns, and had her heart repaired by an Israeli surgeon. The survival of tiny Salaam, whose name means peace in Aramaic, has become a rare example of the region's fractured and clashing people working together.

When it comes to rebuilding Iraq, we might consider the power of faith over the power of force. When it comes to peace in the Middle East we might consider the power of love over the power of law. When it comes to accord in our families we might lay down our right to win and find will to belong.

Contrast the Power of Control VS. the Power of Consensus

Here at Christmas, it is time to realize where power lies and straighten it out in our minds. The story goes that Fidel Castro was locked in a baseball battle with Hugo Chavez, President of Venezuela. Chavez was pitching. Castro was batting. When called out on strikes, Castro walked to first base, declaring the pitch a ball and not a strike. Somebody said, "It's hard to get a batter out when the batter has the power to override the umpire's calls." I have a feeling ball games would not last very long with that kind of player. Some of us try to run our business and our homes like Castro runs his country; by power and control. It is a losing cause.

Jim Stuart said, "My classmates at Harvard Business School used to call me the Prussian General. For many years that was my approach to leadership. Then my wife died, and my mail order business went bankrupt. I accepted a job that gave me no power, no money and no knowledge. It forced me down into a deeper part of myself. The result was a team of people that would walk through walls together. Through servant leadership we formed a successful team, built a thriving company." When it comes to business, are you a dictator? Around your house do you roar like a raging lion? The world has taught you to be tough; will you let Christ make you tender? The real test of power is how you let it go.

Like you, I watched the news reports of the capture of Saddam Hussein this week. I was reminded how this ruthless dictator, since 1979, had butchered hundreds of thousands of people, including members of his own family and his own political party. I remembered how he kept his country in turmoil and persecution. I watched again the tapes of his claim to fame and defiance against the United Nations. I saw once more his elaborate life style full of palaces and personal extravagance.

Then I saw the spider hole where he spent the last days of his life. I watched the endless running of the tapes as a doctor searched his head for lice. I thought how he more closely resembled a homeless man on a street than one of the most powerful men of the world.

Then I was drawn back to Christmas. And I thought about Jesus born in a manger. He was a simple man, this Jesus, but didn't He love and didn't He shine?

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus
Let all heaven and earth proclaim
Kings and kingdoms will all pass away
But there is something about that name.

Amen.