

...In the City of David...<sup>1</sup>

Most Bible scholars believe these days that of the four gospels, Mark was written first. A few years after Mark, Matthew and Luke, decided that they both liked Mark and that they could productively add some things that would make the story of Jesus more informative and helpful. Both Matthew and Luke agreed that the story of Jesus needed to include the circumstances of his birth. This is how we come by the Christmas stories that we have today. Matthew and Luke give us what we call the Infancy Narratives—and we've been enjoying them at Christmas ever since.

So, in addition to being really good and beautiful stories, the infancy narratives also cast important light on everything else in Jesus' ministry. To illustrate, let's imagine that you are at a Christmas party with a bunch of strangers and your friend comes over to you and whispers, "See that guy over there by the shrimp bowl? He's the president of the whole corporation and the richest man in the state." You look at him and think that he looks like an average person. You think, "Wow!"

The Infancy Narratives do that. They tell us things about Jesus that may not be obvious owing to the fact that he looks like a normal human being a normal baby.

One of the ways we're introduced to Jesus is in the many titles that are used in the Infancy Narratives. One example is the title, Messiah. Now, what's a messiah? A messiah is a king who will repeat and extend the glories of the first really great king of Israel, David. God promised David that his family would reign over Israel forever. Now, the immediate sons and grandsons of David were just ordinary rulers at best. But the prospect of a really great king like David, who would bring Israel to its true preeminence over all other nations as God's chosen people, was long the dream of the Jewish people.

Luke and Matthew drop many hints that Jesus was the Messiah. His father, Joseph, was a distant relative of King David. Jesus was born in the village of Bethlehem whose only claim to fame was that that was where David came from. We read the infancy narratives and they are clearly dropping not so subtle hints that the Messiah has arrived.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on December 12, 2010 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, Ga. Additional information and sermons can be found at [www.fpclagrange.org](http://www.fpclagrange.org)

Matthew hints, additionally, that Jesus is the new Moses. Matthew tells us how King Herod got jealous, and crudely attempted to get Jesus by sending his thugs to slaughter the little baby boys throughout the region. Well, a remarkably similar story surrounds the birth of Moses way back when the Hebrews were slaves in Egypt. We read Matthew's infancy narrative and we're thinking, "Hey, Jesus is the new Moses."

Now, there's a bit of a conflict that gets set up when we begin to think of Jesus as the new David, the new Moses, the new Herod, the new Augustus Caesar. The conflict is that there were already people filling those positions, thank you very much! Take the expression, "King of the Jews." We know very well the story of the Magi—the Wise Men—who have discerned in the stars that a new king has been born to reign over the Jewish people. The Magi do what dignitaries have done for time immemorial. They set out to the capital city in Judah territory—Jerusalem—with their gifts. The magi are just assuming that a new king of the Jews will be all the rage in Jerusalem. So they go there. Here's the problem. There's already a King of the Jews! That would be Herod who was appointed King of the Jews by the Roman Emperor. The magi really blunder into trouble when they innocently go asking around Jerusalem where the new king is.

The same can be said about the expression savior, which we talked about last week. Savior was a term applied to the Roman Caesar—Augustus. Augustus was already the savior. Augustus had conquered and prevented Rome from dissolving into civil war. Everyone was relieved. There was a lull in violence that people mistook for peace. Augustus was happy to let people think that he was the son of a god. Augustus was not only a lord, he was the lord. Then we read in Luke that Jesus is given all of these titles. Hello! We already have son, savior, and lord—on the throne in Rome.

Now, I realize that this is a lot of information, and in truth there is a lot that we haven't mentioned. The point is this. The infancy narratives introduce us to Jesus as an earthly king. He's not an angel or a spirit. The Babe in the manger is a ruler or leader, to put it more generally. Or to sharpen it, Jesus is introduced as one who is in some kind of competition with existing rulers. He's a different kind of leader to be sure. For one, Jesus isn't violent. He isn't a schemer or a politician. Instead, Jesus came to exercise authority in an entirely new way—with love and peace and truth

and community. And he is still exercising authority. Jesus is still king, still lord, still savior, still leader.

And for our own times we can probably use some of our contemporary terms for authority and leadership. Jesus is our boss for example. To say that turns some interesting lights on. Suppose Jesus were our boss. Now we may have a boss. Jesus doesn't replace him or her. But Jesus is a greater boss a greater authority. Our boss says, "Have those TCP reports in by next Friday." There's no conflict there between how Jesus may be our boss and how our boss is functioning. Now if our supervisor says "And make sure that your findings on the TCP report are what the company need them to be in order for everyone to get a bonus." In other words if our earthly boss suggests that we misrepresent facts or lie about something then there's going to be a conflict between the calling of Jesus our boss and our boss.

Here's where all of this is going. Jesus came to exercise the authority of God in the world. He came because God loved the world and intends that you and I and all of creation would be made new. Jesus didn't come to instruct people on how to escape this world by getting into heaven.

The early Christians understood this. The first couple of hundred years the early church existed in an empire that had what historians call the Roman Imperial Cult. Rome believed that it was destined to dominate the whole world and that the Caesar, which meant emperor, was especially endowed by the gods to reign in power over the world. Civic duty required all citizens to show loyalty by worshipping the emperor. Christians however had a different idea about authority. Jesus is Lord. So the early Christians refused to worship anyone else. This was the crime that the Romans punished sometimes so ferociously. Christians had an alternative authority vision. Jesus is lord! And that outlook changed the Roman Empire.

A central meaning of Christmas has to do with authority in the world. How does the carol, Silent Night put it. "Jesus, Lord at thy birth." Because of this, Christians don't acknowledge other false authorities when their values conflict with those of God as shown in Jesus. Class and status has so much sway in our times, even among children. How much people do to maintain a sense of rank and prestige. And how much pain others feel if they feel left out or rejected. But status doesn't reign supreme. Jesus is Lord. His pattern of

acceptance of all sorts and conditions of humanity is the pattern and authority that will one day rule the world.

Something like this can be said about all would-be authorities and powers. I'm thinking of power of wealth and poverty; alcohol; social cliques or gangs, religious organizations, political ideology, violence, even diseased family systems. Jesus is Lord, and every would-be Caesar, every power to hurt or destroy, is placed under his feet.

Here's the good news! We're reminded in the Christmas stories that God is ever in control and ever working to bring all that he has made into perfection and peace. The powers that would hurt or destroy will never win. And each of us can embrace the authority and lordship in our own lives, by simply acknowledging him, by learning from him, obeying him and by refusing to let any lesser power have control over us. That's who he is and why he came. What a difference that makes! And what a difference it makes in the world around us.