

I.N.I.

Fourth Sunday in Advent
Dec. 18, 2016
Luke 2:1-7

In Christ Jesus, the Baby of Bethlehem who is the Savior of the world, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

By now most of us should know that the word Advent means what—**COMING?** But there are at least three other words that are very prominent during the Advent season. One of them is **REPENT**. Can you think of the other two? A hint. One is in our sermon theme for this morning. That's right—**PREPARE**. The third took one is a little harder. It is the word—**WAIT**.

During the Advent season we **PREPARE** our hearts for Jesus' **COMING** through Godly **REPENTANCE**, but we also need to **WAIT** patiently for that day. We wait patiently for the day of Christmas, but we also **PREPARE** our hearts through **REPENTANCE** and patiently **WAIT** for His second **COMING** on Judgment Day.

Proper preparation is essential in so many areas of life, both physical and spiritual. A person not properly prepared in physical matters may lose his job, lose a client, lose money, or worse yet lose his life. But a person not properly prepared in spiritual matters will lose his eternal life; the greatest loss of all!

The first verses of the simple yet beautiful story of Christ's birth as recorded in Luke 2 make up our sermon text this morning. Our theme is:

PREPARING FOR CHRIST!

One of the reasons for the beauty of the Christmas story is its simplicity. Luke doesn't get bogged down in a lot of details. We're not told what day it is; what time of year; or what year. We're given the basic essential information in a most picturesque way. No doubt the reason for this simplicity is because it is not the surrounding details that are important. It is the event itself! The simplicity of the story serves to magnify the beauty, the majesty, and the importance of the event.

Caesar Augustus ruled in the city of Rome. He was the head of the great Roman Empire, which included most of Europe, Asia Minor and North Africa. His rule also included the area of Israel where Jesus was born. The census/registration that Caesar ordered was for the purpose of taxation. It was to be carried out according to families in their native cities. At that time it was customary to take such a census every 14 years. This was the first such census while Quirinius, also known as Cyrenius, was governor of Syria.

The Jewish way of recording people was not in the city in which you lived, but according to the family to which you belonged. Therefore each family went to his family-seat or hometown city or village. Mary and Joseph at this time were living in Nazareth in the province of Galilee; the northern part of Israel, but both were of the house and lineage of David; the great King of Israel. David's family seat was in the little town of Bethlehem, in the southern province of Judea, about 7 miles south of Jerusalem. That is why this journey had to be made even though Mary was so close to giving birth. It was about 100 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem; not far by today's standards, but a goodly journey on foot or by donkey, especially with one who is about to give birth.

At this time Mary and Joseph were pledged to be married, they were engaged. The vows had already been made public, all that remained was for Joseph to take his bride to his home and have the ceremony. Mary was registered with Joseph. This was done so that Mary would not be registered as an unwed mother, but as Joseph's wife; so that the Child she would give birth to might be Joseph's Son according to the law, and not be regarded as illegitimate. Later on we'll see why all of these seemingly insignificant details are so important for Luke to mention.

In Bethlehem, the most glorious gift was given. We know the words and the events so very well. Mary and Joseph must have arrived after many others had already come; for the little town was filled with people and the inn or local hotel was filled. There was no room. They evidently did not have any relatives living in Bethlehem with which to stay. The only place that they could find was a stable.

Imagine, the Almighty Son of God, the Prince of Peace, the King of kings and Lord of lords was born in that lowly stable, a place built for animals to eat and sleep. The place was out of the ordinary, but His birth was not. It was just like yours and mine. His first clothes were the customary strips of

cloth, swaddling clothes, that bundled Him up tight and His first bed was a feeding trough for the cattle, a manger.

HOW SILENTLY, HOW SILENTLY, THE WONDROUS GIFT IS GIVEN!

No one knew what was happening, not a soul was there to witness this great event except for Mary and Joseph. The greatest gift ever given to mankind and it was given in almost total obscurity, with no fanfare, no publicity, in one of the back alleys of a little, insignificant town in Israel. But it was all according to God's plan.

As we look back on this remarkable story we see how the world prepared for Christ's birth. Really they didn't. They were too busy with other things. Concerned with taxes and travel. No doubt the registration offices were extremely busy. People were possibly already receiving their tax statements and undoubtedly there were cries of complaint at the high taxes levied on them by the Romans. Since so many relatives were coming back to their roots they were probably getting together in their homes with family reunions and meals. They might even have exchanged gifts after not having seen some of these relatives for so long a time. This feasting and gathering probably lasted until the registration time was over and then the people would go back to their homes. For the most part, the world did not prepare for Christ's birth--for the people were too preoccupied with other things.

So how does the world prepare for Christ's birth today? Ironically in much the same way: concerned with travel and taxes. Many at this time of the year are beginning to be concerned about their taxes. The tax forms are sent out around this time of the year. People are looking back on their financial situation of this past year, are making sure their flex spending is complete and perhaps are hoping for a better fiscal coming year.

This time of the year millions of people throughout the U.S. and the world are traveling to their hometowns for family gatherings, reunions, parties, gift exchanges lasting several days, maybe even the whole week long between Christmas and the New Year. In a very real sense the world's preparation for Christmas has not changed very much; unfortunately!

Even though Christ Jesus is the reason for the season, the heart and core of this holiday, the center of our celebration; yet for the most part the people of the world neglect to prepare for Him and neglect Him in their celebrations. They go their merry way, being concerned about the things of this world: shopping, bills, end of the year bonuses, travel & vacations, parties, gifts and celebrations with very little thought, if any, to the real reason for the season!

BUT HOW DID GOD PREPARE FOR CHRIST'S BIRTH?

He made certain that everything was just as He had planned. We read in Gal. 4:4 **BUT WHEN THE FULLNESS OF THE TIME HAD COME, GOD SENT FORTH HIS SON, BORN OF A WOMAN...**

When the fullness of the time had come. Caesar Augustus had no idea that his decree for this registration was by the direct will of the Almighty God. While it looked like it was the Emperor who was directing and dictating these events, we see in reality that God was and ever is in control. History is **HIS STORY!** He used this godless, unbelieving ruler to carry out His Gospel plan of salvation. His time, therefore, the world's time had come.

All of the past prophetic promises of the Old Testament concerning the Messiah's birth had to be fulfilled. Where, what, who, when, how? The virgin mother had already been chosen; the Holy Spirit had already worked the miraculous conception; the trip had to be made--for as we heard in our first Scripture reading from Micah--written some 400 years before this time--the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Both parents: Mary his physical mother and Joseph his legally adopted father had to be from David's line. Everything happened according to God's will, even the fact that the inn was full and that the stable was available. Nothing happened by chance. God planned that His Son, rich though He was--- the Son of God who rules all things--would become poor for us; a human being, so that through His poverty we might become rich; as spiritually rich as Christ in righteousness and holiness, co-rulers with our King and Savior.

Jesus was born in a barn, a little human Baby, susceptible to all the temptations, illnesses, problems, sufferings and sorrows we have--all of it marvelously planned out by God and all of it being fulfilled as God planned.

SO HOW DO WE PREPARE FOR CHRIST'S BIRTH?

On that first Christmas night, prior to the announcement to the shepherds, only two people knew the

Christ-child was born: Mary and Joseph. The world was busy, too busy to take note, to even notice this lowly event. Too busy with traveling, registrations, paying taxes, working, organizing things, family gatherings, etc. Only the two who **HAD PREPARED** themselves for this birth knew and rejoiced. They prepared themselves, by not only traveling 100 miles, but prepared their hearts in response to the angel's message some nine months earlier--that this Child would be the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior of the whole world--born to live and to die for all of mankind and to rise again to live forever.

Mary and Joseph traveled 100 miles to celebrate the birth of their first-born Son. May we this Saturday evening and Sunday morning, moved by the Holy Spirit, travel the few miles to be found in our Lord's house properly prepared to worship our new born King. We have been preparing our hearts with our special Advent services. The Spirit has filled us with His Word so that we will be prepared with repentant hearts, to humbly kneel before His manger and see in this birth the Child who has come to save us from all of our sins. We have prepared and eagerly are awaiting the time to be able to joyously sing: **All My Heart This Night Rejoices...Rejoice, Rejoice, This Happy Morn! ...Christ the Lord to Us is Born!...We Christians May Rejoice Today!...Oh, Rejoice, Ye Christians Loudly...Hail the Day So Rich in Cheer!**

Christ was born when the world was in darkness, not only the physical darkness of night, but the spiritual darkness of sin and death. In that darkness the majority of the world has remained and still lies. Today there is spiritual darkness in the hearts of so many, many people. May we who have been prepared by the Lord for this fullness of the time, proclaim to this world of darkness that the Light of the world, Jesus Christ has come, has been born. Why? He has been born to enlighten the hearts of all who trust in Him. May the awe and the wonder of this story we know so very well, sink deeply into our hearts so that we like Mary, when all of these events were accomplished, **PONDER** them in our hearts today, tomorrow and always.

Let us rise and join in praying together Hymn 75:1, 3, 4. Amen.