

## Christmas 2017 – Mass at Midnight

The reason Joseph and Mary were headed to Bethlehem was because the emperor, Caesar Augustus, demanded it. He wanted everyone to be registered, more than likely so that he could get more taxes out of them.

Joseph and Mary went. They really had no choice. The emperor had the power. Joseph and Mary had none.

At least that's how things look to those who cannot see. The powerful are making decisions to strengthen themselves and, in the process, burdening the powerless.

For those who have eyes to see, though, something quite the contrary is going on. The "facts" as Luke presents them really indicate a larger purpose that the emperor has no power over whatsoever.

The "whole world" that Augustus is attempting to register will eventually be subjected to the still hidden plan of God.

The true purpose of the census is not to fill the imperial coffers. It is to provide a reason for Joseph and Mary to travel to Bethlehem, the city of David. There's a prophecy that God wants to be fulfilled and so, the Messiah's mother and foster father make their way to Bethlehem.

Augustus may be the ruler of the earth, but he is a pawn in the larger plot of heaven.

That gives us reason to move from what the emperor is doing to focus on the further details of Jesus' birth:

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a firstborn, a child wrapped in swaddling clothes, laid in a manger, and excluded from the inn—are all brimming with meaning.

They all symbolize truths about Jesus that are central to his identity and mission. These are the symbols that will help those awaiting the Messiah to understand his true character.

The “first born” alludes to a future time when others will receive the revelation of Jesus and live as he did. The life of Jesus will generate a new family of followers.

“No room in the inn” foreshadows the rejection Jesus will experience from the chief priests and the people. At his death he will be a stranger in Jerusalem. At his birth he is a stranger in Bethlehem.

The symbols of Jesus’ birth tell the truth of his life—some will receive his revelation and follow him while others will reject his revelation and kill him.

From the vantage point of history we can see how the prophecies about Jesus have played out. Augustus and the Roman Empire have long since been replaced by other pretenders to power. Their efforts to rule the whole world have also fallen short.

The followers of Jesus continue to move forward through history, adjusting their discipleship to the signs of the times they read with the eyes of faith. We know the heavy lifting has been done. Jesus’ death and resurrection, his sending of the Holy Spirit into our hearts have provided the means necessary for the

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work he began to be brought forward in time until God completes the work he has begun in his creation and the promised new heavens and new earth have become reality.

As we celebrate Christmas in the midst of the darkness and brokenness of our world, we can avoid the dead end of thinking things will never get better, that there are no more turns in the story to be experienced.

The meager beginnings of the story remind us that only with the eyes of faith can we discern how God is still active. Otherwise, we cannot see the way forward, and conclude falsely that God's promises have petered out.

The angels call out to the shepherds, "Do not be afraid!" We know the work left to do will require our best efforts. But we know as well that they are being taken up in a story that God is writing, and it comes to the end he has already determined.