

Behold! The Time Was Right

Luke 2:1-7

Introduction

This is the third Sunday in Advent and thus the third in our series of sermons on the story of Jesus. As you know, our key word is:

BEHOLD!

We are defining this hard to define word as like this:

Stop what you are doing! Pay attention! Something important is happening right now. You don't want to miss it.

So far in our series we have been able to find the word "behold" somewhere in the text. Not so today. No matter what translation I consulted that word did not appear. So, rather than read it, we need to infer where it ought to be placed. Since this word has been pointing us to a part of the story that we might otherwise overlook because we think other details are more important or more interesting, I've chosen to put it right in the middle of verse 6.

Behold! The time came for the baby to be born ... (Luke 2:6)

Why there? Well, did you know that in the state of Ohio there were 135,134 babies born last year? Worldwide there were more than 140 million babies born that same year. That's an average of more than 385,000 per day.

That birth rate is obviously higher than the birth rate in the Roman Empire during the days of Jesus. But I hope it makes us think about how relatively insignificant the birth of Jesus was ... to the watching world. One more baby. One more mouth to feed. Or, in keeping with the story line in the text, one more person to be counted and taxed.

When you and I look into that stable, we see a Savior. But we live on this side of the crucifixion. We have the incredible advantage of seeing the whole story of Jesus – beginning to ending. But on the day of His birth, the world only knew that moment. So they only saw a baby. Another baby.

If we are writing the Gospel, we want people to stop and take a closer look at this baby! We want them to see Jesus! We want them to see the fulfillment of Isaiah's promise, and the Savior of the world. So if we write this Gospel text, we will insert a "behold" right here in verse 6.

Behold the time came. Let me make three observations about that time.

OBSERVATION #1: IT WAS A HISTORICALLY SIGNIFICANT TIME

Verse 1 establishes the historical context:

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (Luke 2:1)

In the Roman Empire a census was taken every 14 years for the double purpose of assessing taxes and discovering who was eligible for the military draft. The Jews would not be drafted, of course, but they would be taxed.

Every Jewish male was required to return to his ancestral home so that the government officials could record his name, his occupation, how much property he owned, and the names of everyone in his family.

Bible scholars have the documentation for every census taken from A.D. 20 through A.D. 270. Plus we know exactly when Quirinius ruled as governor of Syria. Those two historical facts make it possible for us to document the year Jesus was born.

It is amazing, isn't it, that our Sovereign God orchestrated the birth of Jesus so that he would be born at exactly the perfect historical time – a time that could prove that a man named Joseph and a woman named Mary became the parents of a son named Jesus. Augustus was the Caesar at the time, but God was in charge.

We live in a world of skeptics, many of whom question our understanding of the birth of Christ. God knew that would happen. And He made sure there would be proof.

Part of the beauty of this passage is found in the contrasts. What was the most important event happening on this night?

- For the people of that day, the answer was that a census was being taken, and that my taxes were about to go up! Caesar Augustus issued a decree, and he was the most important man in the world!
- But in reality, the correct answer is that on this historically significant day, a Savior was born. He wasn't going to raise your taxes. No, he was going to give you the free gift of eternal life. And he would be the most important person in the world!

Behold! The time came ... An historically significant time, and ...

OBSERVATION #2: IT WAS A TROUBLING AND CHAOTIC TIME

Verse 3 reads:

And everyone went to their own town to register. (Luke 2:3)

Historians estimate that a half million people flocked to Bethlehem for this census. That is a lot of people in a town with a normal population of under 3,000. As a result, hotel rooms were scarce, and AirBnB had not been invented yet. Mary and Joseph would not have been the only people turned away that night. Many others would have been left to roll out a sleeping bag wherever they could find room.

It was a busy time in Baltimore, MD in the fall of 1797. So when the manager of Baltimore's largest and most prestigious hotel saw a dirty and poorly dressed farmer at the front desk, he told the man there were no available rooms in his hotel. The manager believed that if he allowed this man to stay there it would create a bad image for his inn, and thus would be bad for future business. The man left without incident and found a room in another place.

Shortly thereafter, the manager learned that this dirty and poorly dressed farmer was none other than Thomas Jefferson, the current Vice President of the United States. So to correct his mistake, the manager of the hotel immediately he sent a note of apology to Mr. Jefferson. He invited Jefferson to return to his hotel as his guest. There would be no charge for the room.

Vice President Jefferson instructed his messenger to return with this message: "Tell the innkeeper that I have already engaged a room. I value his good intentions highly, but if he has no place good enough for a dirty American farmer, then he has none suitable for the Vice President of the United States."

Bethlehem was a buzz the day Jesus was born. The Jewish citizens hated the taxes imposed on them by the Romans. And no one is happy when a half people are all vying for the same limited hotel rooms. The Bible tells us that because of all this chaos in the world, there was no room in the inn.

Behold the time came ... Oh, it was a hectic time. Historical, but hectic. A great time to overlook the birth of a baby! But not a good time to pause and take a good look.

Which brings us to the final observation:

OBSERVATION #3: IT WAS THE RIGHT TIME

Verses 6-7a:

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. (Luke 2:6-7a)

It was the right time ...

- Biologically. Nine months had passed.
- Theologically. The census got them to Bethlehem! That's where the prophets said he was to be born. Up to that point, Mary had been living in Nazareth. Nice town, but the wrong town theologically.
- Historically, as we said earlier.

All the pieces had come together, making this moment the right time for the birth of Christ.

- If Jesus had been born two weeks early, he would have been born in the wrong place.

- If Jesus had been born 50 years earlier, the Romans would not have been ruling the world. Julius Caesar didn't conquer Britain until 55 A.D. That would have meant no census to help us document the birth of Christ.

In the great and wonderful plan of God, this moment became the right moment for the birth of Jesus. In the poetic language of the King James Version, this coordination of events is described as “the fullness of time.”

But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son... (Galatians 4:4)

I love that. The fullness of time. The Oxford dictionary tells us that this phrase – the fullness of time – means that if you are patient, everything will become clear.

APPLICATION

And right there is our point of application. The “behold” of this passage is meant for us to marvel at the timing of God. In the fullness of time, God orchestrated all the events of the world so that the birth of His Son would happen at precisely the right moment. The moment He had planned from before the beginning of the world. In the fullness of time. In His time.

King David wrote the following in Psalm 31:

But I trust in you, Lord ... My times are in your hands. (Psalm 31:14-15)

Trusting the timing of God is not an easy thing. Ask the people of Israel! They had been waiting for the Messiah for hundreds and thousands of years!

I am highly structured when it comes to time. But God just laughs at my schedules. He has never chosen to operate in a way that coordinates with my sense of timing. Some prayers are answered before I even have much of a chance to pray them; others are taking way longer than I think they should. In fact, I have been tempted on more than one occasion to help God move things along. Can you relate?

I encourage you to take this verse from King David today. Make it your prayer. “My times are in your hands.” And patiently wait as God works in His majesty to bring all things together at just the right time.

Amen.