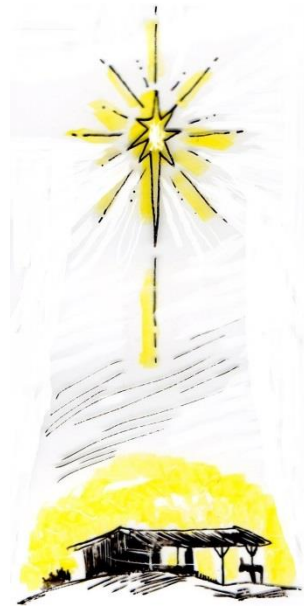


# The Coincidence of Christmas

"And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city." (Luke 2:1-3).

We know that Joseph and Mary lived in lowly Nazareth, and that they were relatively poor. We also know that the prophets of old foretold that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, which is about 70 miles south of Nazareth. And we know that somehow Joseph and Mary, despite their financial challenges, would need to move to Bethlehem before the child is born.



But there is more to this story than at first meets the eye.

An angel could have appeared to them and said, "It's time to go." And a miraculous provision could have been made whereby the trip was rendered effortless.

I mean, Elijah's flaming chariot could have swooped down and whisked them away in seconds. Or, for that matter, the Spirit could have mysteriously transported them like He did with Ezekiel, or with Philip the Evangelist after he baptized the Ethiopian.

But no, it was a donkey ride for a very pregnant Mary.

Furthermore, it was necessary that Bethlehem be very crowded -- in fact, over-crowded, so as to insure that there would be no room for them in the Inn; thus leaving them to the one place no one would choose on purpose -- a stable behind the Inn, where a manger would serve as the Baby's bed.

And, mind you, all this had to happen in ways that could not be detected as *divine*.

So God put it in the heart of Caesar Augustus to issue a decree that all the world be taxed, requiring every man to return to his home town. Thus Joseph, against his better judgment, had to submit to the law of Caesar and make the perilous trip to Bethlehem.

Arriving at such an hour that all rooms had been taken -- he settled into the stable and unknowingly found himself at the epicenter of human history.

The Bible tells us that "God works all things after the counsel of His will." So while Caesar regarded himself as the Emperor of the world, it was the Lord of Heaven and Earth who directed the King's heart to accomplish His divine will.

When we carefully examine all the extraordinary events that each had to occur in an exact order and with specific timing so that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem, in a manger -- we cannot but be staggered at how the hand of God worked in all these things.

This was more than mere coincidence -- it was



the Coincidence of Christmas.

Let me ask a question. Is it possible that the hand of God is still working in coincidental ways today, both in our world as well as in our personal lives, in order to bring more and more of Jesus into our daily affairs?

And instead of murmuring and complaining about disruptions and inconveniences -- might we all be better served by looking for how God's hand is working, and then start thanking Him for what He is doing?

And here's a question.....

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## Why Bethlehem?

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." (Micah 5:2).

Why Bethlehem? Of all the places Jesus could have been born, why Bethlehem. And mind you, it wasn't a random happenstance that He was born there -- it was foretold. He was ordained by God to be born there, and the prophets of old declared it. Bethlehem was the chosen city of His birth.

But why?

Maybe we might suppose that Bethlehem was chosen specifically because it was so small and insignificant. After all, God seems to take special delight in exalting the lowly and humbling the proud. He forever is taking the things that are foolish and confounding the wise; the things that are nothing, to bring to nothing the things that are thought to be something.

So, maybe this is why He chose Bethlehem. Maybe. But I think there is still something more to this that is worthy of our consideration.

The name Bethlehem means "House of Bread."

Jesus said of Himself, "I am the Bread of Life."

Don't you find it more than a little remarkable that the Bread of Life was sent down from Heaven to be born in the House of Bread. But there is still one more detail, too important to overlook.

We know that Jesus was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. But what we may not know is that the manger in which He was placed was actually a feeding trough.

And now the full picture unfolds before us -- the Bread of Life was sent down from Heaven above into the House of Bread, and placed in a feeding trough. Why? That we might eat and live!

This is what Jesus was talking about when He said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If you eat this bread, you will live forever. The bread that I will give you is my flesh, which I give so that the world may live." (John 6:51)

The plain meaning of the passage is that by his body and his blood offered

in sacrifice for sin, He would procure pardon and life for man; that they who partook of that, or had an interest in that, should obtain eternal life. He uses the figure of eating and drinking because, among the Jews, eating and drinking was expressive of sharing in or partaking of the privileges of friendship.

And there's just one more thing....



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## Why were the Shepherds the FIRST to be told?

"Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night." (Luke 2:8).



No one knew but Joseph and Mary, and their closest relatives. To all other observers Mary was a pregnant girl shrouded in scandalous rumor; and Joseph was a rascal. This may account for the added disinterest shown to them when they needed a place in crowded Bethlehem for the Babe to be born.

An Inn Keeper showed them kindness and offered the stable behind his Inn. And there the Baby was born. No one knew but Joseph and Mary, and their closest relatives, that this Baby was the Messiah; the Savior of the World.

Who would be first outside the Holy Family to hear the news? It was the Shepherds in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night.

At first telling this strikes us as strange -- but not any more so than all the other unexpected turns and twists in the story thus far.

And then we may deem it rather quaint that humble shepherds would be told first; after all, haven't we all read, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." Maybe God has a tender place

in His heart toward shepherds, and so decided to let them in on it first.

In reality, there was a very specific and important reason why the Shepherds were first to hear the announcement.

In his book *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Alfred Edersheim explains that these particular shepherds were distinct from all others in Israel; and their flocks, which they tended so closely at night, were also very special. For you see, these shepherds were a part of the priesthood, and these sheep were specifically set aside to be sacrificial lambs in the Temple services.

The shepherds had the responsibility to make sure that a lamb without spot or blemish be preserved from harm, until it could be brought forth for sacrifice. It was only fitting therefore that the angels would make the news known to them, just when they were minding their own business.

And listen carefully to the words the Angel spoke. "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

In other words, the Spotless Lamb has come. "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the World!" said John, as he saw Jesus walking by the Jordan some years later.

Seeing these priest shepherds were about to be put out of business once the ultimate Lamb was sacrificed, it was only fitting that they were given notice well in advance!

What a Coincidence!

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## CONCLUSION

Never think for a moment that God is not working in even the seemingly most unrelated details of your day. He orchestrates events and encounters at just

the right time to bring each of us closer and closer to Himself. We therefore ought always to lift up our heads and watch for what the Lord is doing....for no coincidence, be it great or small, is without significance. Each one takes us a step closer to an encounter with Jesus.

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## Prayer

Father, we thank You for Your faithfulness to always work things for our good. Open our eyes to always see Your hand at work in the events that affect our lives, be they great or small.

Let us like Abraham of old, walk with wonder in Your presence as you guide us step by step to new encounters with You and deeper discoveries of Truth.

Keep our minds from complaint and bitterness, and fill our hearts with thankfulness and joy at the many ways You work in our lives each day.

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## Questions for Discussion Group

Here is a way you can share this truth with others. Print out the **PDF** version of this Devotional; make copies and distribute among a group of friends. Meet together, read the devotional, and then use the following questions to help lead a discussion time.

1. What is the most amazing "coincidence" you've ever experienced?
2. In what ways would your life be different if you had missed out on what God was doing in that experience?
3. Is it possible that some of the decrees that are being made by world leaders today might be steps in a process whereby God brings about a deeper revelation of Jesus in our times?
4. How would your life be different if you went about each day watching for the hand of the Lord to work on your behalf?
5. In what way can you personally help others to experience an increasing awareness of God's presence in their lives?



### ***Thank You for 2014!***

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