In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.

“In those days” – Luke is referring to the time period of Mary’s pregnancy. Luke has finished the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth with the birth of John the Baptist, and now he wants to concentrate on the birth of Jesus.

“A decree went out” – Only the Roman Empire had the authority to issue decrees. These decrees were posted by Roman soldiers. They were not suggestions. They were not good ideas. They were orders with warnings and consequences.

“From Emperor Augustus” – Most translations have “Caesar Augustus.” After Octavius won the battle against Antony and Cleopatra, the Roman Senate gave him the names Caesar and Augustus. His adopted father was Julius Caesar who was actually his great uncle. Augustus ruled from 27 BC to 14 AD, and established Pax Romana, which means Roman Peace.

Roman Peace did help the spread of Christianity with Roman roads, safety in travel, and the establishment of one language: Greek.

“That all the world should be registered” – The Empire had power and authority, never hesitating to enforce or punish. For example, Roman soldiers were give the authority to observe, arrest, judge, and execute without any help from anyone else.

The decree was about registering for taxation and military service. For the Jews it only meant taxation. Jews were generally not Roman citizens, and thus did not serve in the military. Actually, the registering was like census taking, and it occurred every fourteen years. Actual documents are possessed of every census from 20 AD until about 270 AD.

This registration started with Julius Caesar. In 48 BC, he traveled to Egypt because he wanted to meet Cleopatra, the Queen and Pharaoh of Egypt. While he was there, Cleopatra gave him a tour of her empire and showed him everything she did when her people were registered. They listed their money, property, family, livestock, tables, chairs, dishes, clothes, linen, and everything else the census takers could list.
Julius was impressed by her organization. She literally taxed everything an Egyptian owned. Everything! And when he returned to Rome, Julius implemented everything he saw in Egypt.

2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Throughout history, most have thought that 0 means the actual year Jesus was born. For three reasons, the birthday of Jesus has to be moved to an earlier date: 1. The Roman calendar had some conceptual problems. 2. Quirinius did not become governor of Syria until 6 AD. 3. King Herod had to be alive when Jesus was born, but he actually died in 4 BC. Thus, scholars estimate the date of the birth of Jesus to be sometime between 6 BC and 4 BC.

3 All went to their own towns to be registered.

Actually, not everyone! The Jews were given a special ruling. The rest of the Roman Empire registered where they lived, but somewhere in history, the Jewish people were permitted to register in their town of origin. That’s what Luke means by the phrase “their own towns.”

4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.

Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem because the birth of the Messiah was to be in Bethlehem. You just heard the prophecy of Micah. It was a well-known passage. When the Magi got to Jerusalem, they asked: “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? We have seen his star at its rising, and have to come to worship him.” King Herod was upset and asked all of the religious leaders about the Messiah. They quoted the Micah passage about the birth.

It’s interesting to think about prophecy. How will God fulfill prophecy? How will God arrange to have Jesus, the son of Mary and the Son of God, born in Bethlehem? How will God get Joseph to take his wife, Mary, away from Nazareth and journey to Bethlehem?

Well, the easy answer is this: God used the Roman census taking to force the hand of Joseph. Joseph had no choice. When Roman decree came out, everyone had to obey in the Roman Empire immediately. There was no waiting for a more convenient time.

But further, think about the history of Roman census taking. It didn’t just start in 6 BC. It started with Julius Caesar. And it didn’t start with him. It started with Cleopatra. You know what this means, don’t you? God used Cleopatra and then God used Julius Caesar to bring about God’s will that the birth of Jesus would occur in Bethlehem.
Even further, God’s timing had to be perfect. Census taking occurred every fourteen years – which means the birth had to happen in Bethlehem just at the right time and the right year.

Now, let’s step back a moment and merge the story of Mary in Luke’s gospel with the story of Joseph in Matthew’s gospel. It seems clear that Mary found out first. The angel visited Mary first. She immediately went to see Elizabeth and spent three months there until John was born. Then she went back to Nazareth at least three months pregnant. Somehow Joseph found out. He decided as an honorable man to deal with the situation in his own way, but the angel visited him and told him the truth about the conception. Joseph changed his mind.

At that moment, both gospels are silent, but I think it’s clear what happened. Joseph and Mary saw each other and shared stories about angel visits. Then they made plans together.

5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

Do you think they traveled alone? The Hallmark card silhouette of Mary and Joseph summarizes our thoughts, doesn’t it? It shows Joseph walking beside Mary on a donkey.

Last Sunday, I asked you to consider the cultural situation of Mary and whether she walked to see Elizabeth on her own. I think you decided that fathers and mothers do not allow their young daughters to walk alone for about 100 miles.

Consider Joseph’s situation. Did anyone else go with them? If Joseph’s father was alive, he had to go to Bethlehem to register. If Joseph had a brother or an uncle, they also had to go.

Here’s my position. Back then, people traveled in caravans for safety and protection. I think the whole extended family traveled to Bethlehem because they all had to enroll!

6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.

We don’t know when they arrived in Bethlehem. We don’t know how long the census taking took. It depends on the number of people and the number of census takers. Maybe some were not trained well, because it only happened every 14 years. So, while they were there, labor started. It was time to deliver the Son of God. Probably midwives helped her.

7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Let’s be clear about the facts, and then consider two questions.
Jesus was the firstborn of Mary. As I said two Sundays ago, Mary had more children.

She wrapped him in bands of cloth – swaddling clothes, as other translations word it. It was a sign of poverty. This was not a birth of wealth or royalty.

Our daughter, Rachel, works at Overland Park Medical Center with pre-mature babies. They have special diapers for babies under three pounds. But when worked at Olathe Hospital with big babies (her words), she told us about swaddling. It’s been used by nurses and fathers and mothers and grandparents for centuries to secure a baby and make them warm. In less than 10 seconds, Rachel can swaddle a baby.

Mary laid Jesus in a manger – a simple box used to feed animals. This is the first indication that Joseph and Mary stayed in a stable or cave or maybe out under the stars. We don’t know the exact location, but we know it was not fancy. Maybe the midwife brought the cradle with her.

The reason for the manger is offered by Luke. There was no room in the inn. For centuries, the innkeeper was blamed. The fault of the innkeeper is even included in some Christmas hymns and songs. Consider the situation for a moment.

Who arrived first in Bethlehem? But of course: the Roman census takers! They arrived early in order to get ready. They took the first rooms at the Bethlehem inn and probably did not pay.

Who arrived second? But of course: the religious leaders from Jerusalem! With pomp and circumstance, they arrived early to be perfect, to show that they were perfect, and receive the praise from others. They took the left-over rooms at the Bethlehem inn.

What was left for the twenty-eight generations from David to Joseph (Matthew 1:17)? Nothing! No rooms. No guest houses. No place at all!

Do you think Joseph and Mary were the only family members of 28 generations that had to journey to Bethlehem? It would be unreasonable to think so.

Of course, there were no rooms. Most likely, everyone slept under the stars, just like they did when they traveled to Bethlehem, and it took more than one day.

Now, let’s take a step back and consider two questions that come to my mind. I am going to address these questions to me, but I think they are relevant for you.

First, do I honestly believe that God works through history?
That is to say, do I believe that God works through the situations and circumstances of my life, even through people who don’t believe in God?

In September and October, we looked at Jeremiah 29 about God’s plans for the exiles and God’s plans for our lives. God promised to release the people out of captivity, so how did God do make that happen? It was the Babylonians who conquered the Israelites and destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. Then it was the Assyrians who conquered the Babylonians, and it was the Persians who conquered the Assyrians. Finally, when the time was right, God changed the heart of Cyrus, King of Persia, a non-believer, to release the exiles, let them return to Jerusalem, and rebuild the temple.

Who would ever think God would work that way through history?

In 1979, as the pastor of First Presbyterian, Marion, Indiana for five years, I realized things were not going well. There were two factions: one group that wanted to do mission and outreach in the downtown area and one group that wanted the beautiful Tiffany stained glass windows protected. I consulted with Presbytery and Synod, and they said the church was heading toward a split. We had three young children, ages 6, 4, and 1, and frankly we didn’t want to put them through the consequences of such difficulty. I went to the Midwest Career Counseling Center at Columbus, OH and they recommended I consider an Associate Pastor position. I rejected their advice for a year by applying for only pastor positions.

During that time period, I served on the Mission and Evangelism Committee for the Presbytery, and I met Bud. Early in 1980, Bud and his wife visited their former church in Salinas, CA where Dr. Nelson served as the senior pastor. While there, Dr. Nelson asked him: “Do you know anyone in Indiana who would be a good associate pastor for mission and evangelism?” “Yes, I do,” Bud answered. “Bob Bardeen in Marion, Indiana!” Two days before, one of my mom’s two sisters, my aunt Marian, died in Pasadena, CA. My uncle called me and asked me to do my aunt’s funeral. Both were complete atheists, and thus he wanted me not to use the name of God in the funeral. I agree, and got an airplane ticket right away. At the Indianapolis airport, when I called my wife to see how she was doing with the three kids, Joyce said, “I’m okay, but you just got a call from a person in Salinas, CA about a job. Dr. Nelson wants you to call him right away.” I did so at the airport. On the phone, Dr. Nelson asked me: “Are you visiting in California sometime soon?” “Yes, I’m in the airport right now for Los Angeles.” I explained to him the family emergency situation. “Great, can you come and see us as well? You might be the person that God has in mind for our church.”

Do I believe God can work through history, circumstances, situations and people even atheists like my aunt and uncle? Yes, I do.

Did God work through Joseph to get them to Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus? Yes.
Did God work through their parents to bring them together? Yes.
Did God work through Augustus to have a census just at the right time? Yes.
Did God work through Julius Caesar to begin census taking in the Roman Empire? Yes.
Did God work through Cleopatra to influence Julius Caesar to start census taking? Yes.
Does God work through history, people and situations? Yes, God does!

**Second, do I have room in my heart for Jesus?**

That is to say, does my heart have so much clutter that there’s no room for Jesus?

Bethlehem was packed. There are accounts by Jewish historians, like Josephus, that the Roman census caused chaos in most towns. It was not a pleasant time. There was clutter all around as people waited for their time with a Roman official. They had to arrive right away, but there was no assurance about the order of the census taking. Each person had to bring documents with them to prove their status, their lineage, and their property. No lying would be tolerated. The Roman soldiers standing guard had total authority, as I said earlier. Life was not easy from the visitors or for the residents of Bethlehem. Both were burdened with the consequences of a greedy Roman Empire that sought to tax everyone to the maximum. It was crowded in Bethlehem. And as such, there was no room for Jesus in the inn.

Today, is your heart too crowded? Is my heart too crowded?

I’m not confronting you, but just asking you, like I’m asking myself. Is there room?

I have always liked the picture of Jesus knocking on the door (Revelation 3:20). He is on the outside knocking. I have always thought that Jesus is knocking at all of our doors, all of the time, even if we are already a Christian. We are in the inside, sitting or standing, maybe listening or maybe not. It is our responsibility whether we are listening and whether we decide to open the door.

If we do, Jesus wants to come in spend time with us. Will there be room?

Do I have enough room for Jesus this Christmas? Do you?