

“There went out a decree.” What an ominous sounding way to begin the account of our Savior’s birth! These words should be accompanied by monster movie organ music to set a blood-curdling, bone-chilling mood. This statement, “There went out a decree,” is almost as threatening as our own scary-sounding sentence, “I’m from Washington and I’m here to help you.”

In this past Sunday’s sermon I said that this has been the year of fear. It also has been filled with days of decrees, ones coming from all levels of government telling us how to live our lives during this time of pandemic. There have been decrees to shut down public spaces, to shelter in place, to stay six feet apart, to wear a mask, to gather outdoors only, to not gather at all, to limit family gatherings, not to travel. One decree after another in this pandemic year.

At the time of our text the decree goes out from Caesar Augustus, the emperor formerly known as Octavian. Since 27 BC he has been the leader of the Romans with the title of Augustus, meaning “exalted one.” Those of you who were born in the 8<sup>th</sup> month of the year share a slice of his exaltation.

The decree went out for “all the world.” This is an exaggeration on the part of Augustus. The Romans did not rule all the world, but they did consider the parts they ruled to be all that mattered. The purpose of this decree is that people should be enrolled, or registered. We would say that Augustus is taking a census, just like what has happened here in the United States in 2020. Why would a government want to know how many people it rules? To know how much tax money it can expect to collect!

I am a small government guy who complains about the taxes I have to pay and cringes at the thought of how wastefully my tax money gets used. If it had been me hearing this decree I would have responded by fussing and fuming, moaning and groaning and only reluctantly obeying. So it is a good thing that God did not choose me to be Joseph or else the birth of Jesus would have had to happen a lot differently than it did. We see that what Augustus is doing with his decree is unknowingly setting into motion the events leading up to the birth of God’s Son living in our human flesh, Jesus the Christ.

Thinking that he is in charge of the world, Augustus actually is acting according to the hidden plan, purpose and previous prophecy of the universe’s true sovereign and eternal Lord. Instead of a government mandated travel ban, with

no visiting of relatives allowed, this decree of Emperor Augustus gets people moving back to where they come from and where their families still hold property. Augustus' decree for a census drives Joseph from his construction job in the Nazareth area back to his hometown of Bethlehem, for he is a descendant of that Old Testament king David. His new wife Mary must go along with him on this 80-mile journey, even though she is very late in her very special pregnancy.

In this introduction to Jesus' earthly life we see our almighty God making use of human agents, unwitting as they may be, and guiding human events, as secular as they may seem, to bring about His eternal purposes. Here a human leader's decree for the taxation of his empire gives way to the far more important divine King's action for the salvation of the whole world. Augustus wants to gather the people of his kingdom together in order to count heads and collect taxes. The truly exalted Lord God wants to gather people from all times and places in order to forgive us of our sins and to bless us with a full, free and eternal life.

This gift of our God comes to us wrapped in the person and work of His one and only Son. He is the second Person of the Triune God, the promised Messiah, the Christ, the One anointed to be our Savior. He is the manger's baby, the carpenter's apprentice, the disciples' teacher, the demons' defeater, the ill and injured's healer, the Jewish leaders' target, the Roman governor's prisoner, the cross' sacrifice, the tomb's escapee, and the world's ascended Lord sitting at the right hand of His heavenly Father's throne.

“And it came to pass in these days.” We know the rest of the story of Emperor Augustus' decree. God used it as part of His plan to bring His Son into the world to live perfectly for us, to die innocently in our place and to rise victoriously from the dead. How will God use the decrees of this year to work the goodness of His glory in our lives? Is this a time of separating faith from unbelief? Is this the time when some fall away from Him while others are brought closer to Him? Is this a preview of the troubled and terrifying end times that are to come? We don't know the answers to these questions. But we remain confident in the plans and purposes of the same Sovereign God who over 2000 years ago used an earthly government's decree to bring about the birth of His Son in Bethlehem.

And there went out a decree from the Lord Almighty that all the world should be saved. In Jesus' name. Amen.