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Title: Footnotes* Quirinius

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Text: [Luke 2:1-7](#)

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This is the last week of a four-week sermon series based on a book by Julie Lyles Carr called *Footnotes: Major Lessons from Minor Bible Characters*.¹ By the end of this service, we'll have considered four important characters of scripture who changed the course of our faith but whose names very few people know or remember. We've already met Tychicus, Epaphras, and Joanna. Today, we'll get acquainted or reacquainted with Quirinius.

Usually we hear the name of Quirinius just once a year. Quirinius gets his press in the Christmas story and even then, only in Luke's gospel. But, fortunately for him, Luke's is the best of the birth stories (in my opinion) so it's the one that we usually read on Christmas Eve. All we knew about Tychicus, Epaphras, and Joanna came from the Bible, and one would think that would be the same for Quirinius. What scripture tells us about Quirinius is really not much: "This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. (Luke 2:2). That's it. That's the biblical reference. All we know from that is that he was governor of Syria, and that's not much to go on. However, because Quirinius was a political figure, historians wrote about him as well, so we know more than we might think at first glance. The chance for a short sermon just evaporated right before your eyes.

It's difficult to overstate what a major player Quirinius was in the Roman scheme of things. His full name was Publius Sulpicius Quirinius, and he lived from 51 BC – AD 21.² (As an aside, how cool would it have been to live when the calendar turned from BC to AD? I wonder if they had Y2K issues with their computers like we did when it rolled from 1999 to 2000. Actually, the calendar wasn't dated that way until much later, so they wouldn't have known they were living through the move from BC to AD). Anyway, Quirinius was born in a small town outside of Rome into an aristocratic family. In Roman times, that meant his family had achieved position and power through generations of outstanding military achievement on behalf of Roman emperors.

It was through his ambition and drive that Quirinius achieved far more than even his illustrious ancestors. He used his military achievements to ultimately make his way into the complex world of

¹ Carr, Julie Lyles, *Footnotes: Major Lessons from Minor Bible Characters*, The United Methodist Publishing House, copyright 2019.

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quirinius>

Roman politics. He was a climber who didn't rest on his family's military background but instead, smartly used the benefits of his family name to leverage even greater glory in the world of politics.

When you dig back through annals of history, you find all kinds of fascinating achievements of Quirinius. He won decisive battles. He was highly valued by Augustus, the first emperor of the Roman Empire. You remember Caesar Augustus, the same one from the story of Mark Antony and Cleopatra. Augustus would ultimately be known as one of the most powerful and successful leaders of Rome. So trusted was Quirinius by Augustus that Augustus appointed him the tutor for his grandson, Gaius Caesar.

Quirinius knew how to play the game. He moved allegiances as needed for his own political advantage. He married a woman with the right pedigree but then divorced her when a more popular woman became available. Unlike Tychicus, Epaphras, and Joanna, Quirinius is *not* someone we would hold up to our kids as a role model. The idea of success for Quirinius was how high he could climb on the political food chain and how much power he could wield. He was creating what he thought would be a lasting legacy. What Quirinius would eventually become known for is something far different from what he set out to be known for.

People say that church and politics don't mix. They do mix; it's just sometimes they mix like oil and water. The nativity story proves that politics is very much part of God's story. Luke starts the story by telling us who is in political power and how God uses this political power to ensure that Jesus is born in David's town, Bethlehem. We know Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth, but here they are trekking the 60 miles to Bethlehem, at the whim, it would appear, of those in political power. Luke starts the birth story in this way to emphasize that it is, in fact, part of God's plan.

I know some of you go home after sermons and do extra credit reading and research. If you are one of those people, you should be aware that you will find information about confusing dates associated with Quirinius that has never really been resolved. The issue is that Matthew tells us that Herod was king at the time of Jesus's birth: "In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea..." (Matthew 2:1). Luke, as we said, tells us that Jesus was born when Quirinius was governor of Syria. The confusion comes in that these two were in these positions, but they did not overlap.

From records, we know that Augustus ordered the taking of a census every twelve years. One of these was in 8 BC. The other two were 20 BC and 6 AD. It probably took 2-3 years to complete one. Almost certainly the 8 BC census was the one that sent Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. Most likely, the birth of Jesus was in 6 BC. (I know we like to think Jesus was born in year zero, but that's not correct). Herod died in 4 BC, so that timing is right.

The problem is that Quirinius will not become governor of Syria until 6 AD, some 12 years after Jesus's birth, but he likely held some position of power in 6 BC.³ We're getting deeper than we need to go in a sermon, and there are lots of possible explanations that circulated out there if you're interested. For us here at this moment, we shouldn't be overly distracted by these details. Luke's purpose is to place Jesus in Bethlehem, the City of David, for his birth, and he has done that. I resolve it in my mind this way: 1. Caesar Augustus ordered this census. 2. It took place while Quirinius held some position of power in or around Syria. 3. Herod the Great was still living, but in the final year or so of his life.

³ The Census and Quirinius: Luke 2:2 by Wayne Brindle, Liberty University, found at https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1072&context=sor_fac_pubs

The Caesars felt that they ruled the whole world, and Luke even uses the term “whole world” when talking about who should be registered. Here we have two events that affect the whole world: the Roman census and the birth of Jesus Christ. Luke’s telling of the Christmas story first locates the story in the time of a well-known figure, Caesar Augustus, but then proceeds to mention a man by the name of Quirinius. And the thing is, of course, that very few of us would have ever heard of Quirinius if it were not for his inclusion—just in passing, but his inclusion all the same—as one of the cast of characters contributing to the birth of a new king.

Quirinius, assuming he was in power somewhere in the area around, if not directly in, Syria, must have been a gifted man. The Jewish people would have been far from pleased with the orders Quirinius had been tasked to undertake on behalf of Rome, specifically the taking of a census. I love the way in which the remarkable 16th century Flemish artist, Pieter Bruegel, in his painting called *The Census at Bethlehem*, captured the juxtaposition of the messiah that would change the world, still in utero, coming to the census that had been ordered by those seemingly in power.⁴

When you view the painting from afar, all you see is a bustle of activity in every corner—folks moving hurriedly in order to be registered. Unless you spend some time with the painting, you can almost miss the quiet drama being played out front and center, namely the arrival of Mary—a very pregnant Mary—in the foreground and yet obscured by the hustle and bustle that surrounds her. The irony, of course, is that Bruegel is depicting Quirinius’s world—a world in which those in power could snap their fingers and order a census and make people return to their home area to be counted.

Yet we—like Bruegel, the artist—know better. Between the ordered census and the impending birth, we know which set of events would truly shape human history. We know which event would leave an indelible stamp on humankind. Part of what needs to be said at Christmas (and in May and throughout the year), is that we simply do not know what God is up to in our world any more than poor Quirinius could possibly have known what God was up to in his world.

As we now know—only through the grace of hindsight—the real action taking place in Quirinius’s world involved the birth of a baby boy who came to heal and to save. There was nothing Quirinius could have done, nothing Caesar Augustus could have done, to alter God’s coming into our world through Christ. And yet, the fact remains that God most certainly does craft out a role in this drama for Quirinius. He may not have been given top billing, but even though his is a walk-on, cameo appearance in a drama he most certainly would not have imagined, Quirinius is connected to the story of Jesus.

If 6 BC is the correct date, here we are 2,028 years later and we, too, are connected to the story of Jesus. That means learning that we are not mere bystanders. We are much more than that, especially when we invite the God of Jesus Christ to mold us and use us. On the other hand, what is required of us is the willingness to let God be God—to permit the One who guided Joseph and Mary to the census in Bethlehem to move in our midst.

Quirinius thought his legacy would be power over people, but instead it was overseeing a census that would place the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and affect all people for all time. And the news is still

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Census_at_Bethlehem#/media/File:Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder_-_The_Census_at_Bethlehem_-_WGA03379.jpg

spreading. What is our role? Some part of that role we can craft ourselves; other parts of the role we don't get to decide. For the part that we can control, what is our legacy?

I was reminded this week of my great-great-great grandfather Azel Hazen. In some genealogy research, the census of 1800 tells me that he was married and had three boys and one girl under ten. Other documents say that he was a drum major in the War of 1812 (that part is very cool), that he removed (that's the word it used) to Ohio about 1813, and that he slept himself to death.⁵ That's what we know, but I know his impact was greater than three lines of census documents. His legacy is me and my kids, for better or worse.

This week I received the Annual Report from the Christian Church Foundation—our denominational unit that helps donors connect with Disciples ministries. In it are 54 pages of names, some from this congregation, who have left a financial legacy that will support Disciples ministries for years to come. In this congregation, we have nearly 100 people who are Geist Legacy Partners, having given to the endowment or indicated the intention to give an end-of-life gift to Geist Christian Church. All these people are shaping their legacy. Each one of us shapes our legacy in how we demonstrate who we are and who we serve. Do we serve a political king or a financial king or a king that culture tells us we should serve or do we follow a true king?

Schuyler asked if we should sing Christmas carols today and I, at first, said “no.” Then one came to mind that seemed to make sense: “There's a Song in the Air.” Each verse of the hymn ends with a reference to welcoming a king—the king who by order of Augustus and with oversight from Quirinius came into the world in Bethlehem. We worship him still. He remains our king.

⁵ <https://www.genealogy.com/ftm/h/a/z/Walter-Eugene-Hazen/GENE1-0118.html>