Sermon Series: The Hymns of Christmas
O Little Town of Bethlehem

Text: Luke 2:1-7 -- In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 And all went to be registered, each to his own town. 4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. 6 And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Introduction: One of the most beloved songs of the Christmas season started as an advertising gimmick. In **1939**, **Montgomery Ward** tapped advertising executive **Robert May** to write a poem that their store Santa Claus could give away to children who came to visit him. "**Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer**" first appeared in a little booklet published by the department store chain. **More than 2.5 million copies were handed out. And by 1946 more than 6 million copies of the poem were distributed**. Rudolph's story came to musical life in **1949** when May's brother-in-law, **Johnny Marks**, wrote the music. **After it was turned down by Bing Crosby and Dinah Shore, singing cowboy Gene Autry recorded it**. Today "**Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer**" is the highest-selling Christmas carol. What makes this short song so loved? Some people might say that it's the pluckiness and courage of Rudolph, the hero of the story. But the real beauty of the story focuses on grace. By **grace**, Santa chooses Rudolph even though he's **a clear outsider** and "**reject**." He has a defect—his big, annoyingly shiny red nose—that usually disqualified him from getting chosen for other reindeer games. But despite all the other available candidates, who did Santa choose (or "elect") when the fog rolled in? That's right, the one with the weird shiny red nose. The "**weakness**" that was considered a liability by Rudolph and his fellow reindeer became the "**strength**" that Santa used to accomplish his mission. **(Source: Kristen Parrish, No Cape Required (Thomas Nelson, 2013), pp. 219-220)** Do you remember the first time someone read the book to you or you watched the Christmas special, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer? I bet that you were very young. And in your child-like mind, I doubt that you

saw things working out the way they did, but that's what makes the story so great! **No one gave Rudolph a chance to amount to anything except for maybe Clarise – his hot doe-friend, Herbie the Elf, and Yukon Cornelius, the prospector searching for gold. However, when things looked their worst, Santa came a calling, Rudolph led the way, and the rest they say is history.** This isn't the only story with a surprise ending that is associated with Christmas. If you've seen the movie "**A Christmas Story**," you know that **Ralphie** does indeed get the **Red Ryder Carbine-action 200-shot Range Model Air Rifle** that he so dearly hoped for. And how about **the Grinch Who Stole Christmas**? Sure, he absconded with all the presents and decorations the people of Whoville believed were the focal point of their Christmas celebration. **But as you know, the Grinch had a change of heart (it grew three sizes that day), returned everything, and, lo and behold, found the warmth and joy that had alluded not only him, but everyone else except Cindilu Who**. **She was the only one who seemed to remember the true meaning of Christmas**. THESE ARE, OF COURSE, FICTIONAL STORIES THAT END IN WAYS WE DON'T ANTICIPATE. That may be why we enjoy them so much. They're full of surprises!

There is another Christmas story that is also full of surprises, but unlike the three I just mentioned, it really happened! **I don't know if you've thought about this much, but the birth of Jesus was a surprise to many, though perhaps it shouldn't have been**. Certainly, the Scriptures (the Old Testament at the time) had much to say about the coming Messiah. In the Gospel of Luke, we learn that King David (who had lived 1,000 years before) was a key figure in the entire drama that played out in Bethlehem. On three different occasions in the first chapter alone, Luke alludes to the child's connection to Israel's greatest king – (1) **Luke 1:26-27 – In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David**; (**2**) **Luke 1:32-33 – He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end;** (**3**) **Luke 1:69 – "He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago**). These references to David are no accident and help to draw a very important connection between Israel's greatest king and the

Lord Jesus. Join me as we take a few moments and consider together some of the significant ties between the two.

The Messiah's tie to the throne of David (**Luke 2:1-3 -- In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 And all went to be registered, each to his own town**). Luke begins this passage with a reference to the decree of **Caesar Augustus** (better known as **Octavian**) that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. He is generally regarded as Rome's greatest emperor having expanded and unified the empire, established peace throughout (Pax Romana), and ushered in a golden age of Roman literature and architecture. Though he was never officially recognized as a god until his death, his name meant "**exalted**" and was given to him by **the Roman Senate**. This gives you some indication of how highly he was regarded. Caesar Augustus ruled for about 45 years from around **31 B.C. to 14 A.D**. **It is no small thing that Luke mentions how God used the decree of the most influential pagan leader of the 1st century to accomplish His divine plan** (**Proverbs 21:1 --The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He will**) **and set the stage for the Messiah's birth**. This is the One of whom it was said that He would bring a different kind of peace on earth (**Luke 2:14 -- Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased**!). But should this have come as a surprise to so many? Not if they were listening closely to God's voice in the Scriptures. In **2 Samuel 7:11b-13** God made a promise to King David, that was repeated often over the next 500 years by the prophets -- **Isaiah 9:7 -- Of the increase of His government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness; from this time forth and forevermore; Jeremiah 23:5-6; Ezekiel 34:23**— Note: The prophets could not have been speaking of King David as he was long gone. They had to be referring to one of his descendants, who we now know to be Jesus!). THESE ARE BUT A FEW OF THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECIES THAT WERE FULFILLED IN JESUS. HE IS THE SON OF DAVID, HEIR TO THE THRONE.

In announcing His birth, Gabriel got it right. This truly was good news for all people! **Certainly, a man named Simeon felt that way**. He was a righteous

and devout man who had been promised by God that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Christ. That happened for him on the **8th day of Jesus' young life** when He was presented in the temple (**Luke 2:27-32 -- And he (Simeon) came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel).** Why didn't more people put the pieces together? They did not listen as carefully to what God had said long ago. Listening seems to be a problem for a lot of people. In **December 1903**, after many attempts, **the Wright brothers** were successful in getting their "flying machine" off the ground. Thrilled, they telegraphed this message to their **sister Katherine**: "***We have actually flown 120 feet. Will be home for Christmas***." Katherine hurried to the **editor of the local newspaper** and showed him the message. He glanced at it and said, "***How nice. The boys will be home for Christmas***." He totally missed the big news--man had flown! Unfortunately, too many people in ancient Israel missed the big news as well. At that first Christmas, the message resounded loud and clear to all who cared to listen. THE LONG-AWAITED KING HAD COME!

The Messiah's tie to the town of David (**Luke 2:4a -- And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem**). Luke lets us know that the town of David to which he refers is none other than **Bethlehem**. The name means "**House of Bread**." It is to this day located about 5 miles southwest of Jerusalem in the fertile hill country of Judah. Its name came from the grain produced there in Old Testament times and is especially fitting because it is the place where the **Bread of Life** was born (**See John 6:35**). It is a city of some historical significance. Rachel, the wife of Jacob, is buried there (**See Genesis 35:19**). It was in Bethlehem that Ruth met and married Boaz (**See Ruth 1:22, 4:13**). More importantly, it was the place where their famous grandson, David, grew up and tended sheep (**See 1 Samuel 17:12-15**). Bethlehem is where Samuel anointed David to be king over Israel (**See 1 Samuel 16:1, 13**). It was the prophet Micah who predicted that this small city would be the birthplace of the Messiah (**Micah 5:2 -- But you, O**

Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days). Luke assures us that his words came true as Mary gave birth to her firstborn in a manger.

Now, let's talk about our chosen Christmas hymn, O Little Town of Bethlehem for a few moments. Phillips Brooks was known as the most dynamic and inspirational preacher of the mid-**1800s** here in America, but he had lost his fervor and could not seem to recover. While only in his twenties he had become pastor of the **Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia**. He recruited a super salesman named **Lewis Redner** to be his Sunday School Superintendent and organist. The church exploded in growth. They began with 30 children and within a year there were 1000. The next two years the numbers increased, partly because of **Brooks' dynamic preaching** and partly because of **Redner's music**. ***But then the Civil War came and the mood in the church became somber. The national spirit was dying, women were wearing black due to a husband or son killed in battle, and darkness fell over every facet of the worship services***. Brooks tried to be inspirational and encourage his church but it was draining him. When the war ended, he thought the vitality and joy would return immediately but it did not. Abraham Lincoln was assassinated and the pain intensified. Though he was not the President's pastor, he was such a great orator that he was asked to preach at the President's funeral. He reached down deep and found the appropriate words to say for the moment but later he was so burned out that he could not rekindle his own spiritual flame. ***Eventually, he asked the church for a sabbatical and took a trip to the Holy Land. On Christmas Eve in Jerusalem, he mounted a horse and went off riding. At dusk, when the first stars were out, he rode into the tiny village of Bethlehem***. The town had changed little since the birth of Christ. It lifted Mr. Brooks's spirit to be within a few feet of the very spot where Jesus was born. He listened to the singing in the church of the Nativity and felt surrounded by the Spirit of God. Brooks wrote about his horseback journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, where he assisted with the midnight service on **Christmas Eve, 1865: "I remember standing in the old church in Bethlehem, close to the spot where Jesus was born, when the whole church was ringing hour after hour with splendid hymns of praise to God, how again and again it seemed as if I could hear**

voices I knew well, telling each other of the Wonderful Night of the Savior's birth." Wouldn't you know it? When he returned, Brooks searched for some way to express the new stirring in his soul and he decided it would be best communicated in the form of a poem. That poem was when "**O, Little Town of Bethlehem**." It was his friend and co-laborer, **Lewis Redner** who provided the tune -- O little town of Bethlehem how still we see thee lie. Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by. Yet in the dark streets shineth the everlasting light. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight. (**Review: The Messiah's tie to the throne of David; to the town of David**.)

The Messiah's tie to the line of David (**Luke 2:4b – (And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem), because he was of the house and lineage of David**). Genealogies were very important in biblical times. A priest who could not trace his ancestry was put out of his office (**See Nehemiah 7:64**). For the average Israelite his genealogy constituted a title to his farm or home. It also provided him with a record of his family. They were considered public property and were **carefully kept until A.D. 70** when Jerusalem was destroyed. **There are two mentioned in the gospels**. They are found in **Matthew 1** and **Luke 3**. When you take a closer look, you notice that there are some differences between the two. This is because **Matthew follows the line of Joseph** (**Jesus' legal heir**) while **Luke follows the line of Mary** (herself being a blood relative of David). Here are a few other interesting observations about these genealogies: **(1)** Luke's account, written to the Gentiles, traces the genealogy of Christ in reverse order providing Jesus' natural descent and bringing the first Adam and last Adam together (**1 Corinthians 15:45 -- Thus it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit**). **(2)** Matthew's account, because he was writing to the Jews, presents Jesus as the legal and royal heir to the promises made to Abraham and David (**Genesis 12:2-3 -- And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed; 2 Samuel 7:12-13 -- When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall**

build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever); (3) In Matthew's genealogy, other than Mary, there are four women mentioned: **Tamar** (who disguised herself as a prostitute to seduce her father-in-law), **Rahab** (a harlot living in Jericho), **Bathsheba** (who committed adultery with David), and **Ruth** (a Moabitess whose people worshipped a false god). ***Why include them***? ***Their mention reminds us that the grace of God is available to anyone, even foreigners, regardless of their past***.

There is one important factor that cannot be overlooked as we consider these genealogies. **Jesus was the son of Mary and the legal son of Joseph which placed Him squarely in the line of David**. But in another sense, Jesus was very different from everyone else born before or after Him including any from this family tree! **He was then and is now the Son of the Most High**! **This is the essential message of Christmas! He is the unique God-man who has come to save us from our sins**. ***Our response to His birth should not only be to bring Him gifts, but to bow down and worship Him***.

Conclusion: Well, we've considered Jesus' tie to the throne of David, to the city of David, and the line of David. Each of these is very important because they tell us the true identity of the baby born in the manger in Bethlehem. When Laurie and I visited Israel several years ago, we had the privilege of going to Bethlehem and visiting **the Church of the Nativity** which stands on the spot where it's believed Jesus was born. It was erected over **a large rock cave** some **12X13 meters** in size. The main access to the church is by the very small **Door of Humility**. Visitors must enter bending over. Originally the church had three entrances, two of which have been walled up. The present small entrance was made during **the Ottoman era** to prevent mounted horsemen from entering. How appropriate that TODAY those who wish to see the place where it is believed our Lord was born in human flesh must do so humbly with their heads bowed in worship. **Of course, that's only right given that He is the One, after all, who sits on David's throne, who was born in David's city and was of the house and lineage of David.**