

“Christmas Around the World: Sweden”

Luke 2:1-7, Hebrews 2:14-18

12/12/21 Epicenter/BAC

Rev. Brian T. Smeal; pastorsmeal@gmail.com

All Scripture quoted from ESV unless otherwise noted

Sweden is about 1,000 miles from north to south – about the same distance as Clarion or Brookville is from Orlando, FL. Wednesday: our high temperature was 32°; Orlando’s high temperature was 84°. North-south have some very different weather. The weather in southern Sweden is a slushy mix or rain, while northern Sweden has been described as being “Drenched in snow” during December^[1].

Decorations in Sweden tend to be simple and rustic. Many windows in Sweden are decorated with large advent stars, first made in the 1930’s from red paper with holes punched in it to allow the light to shine through. These stars serve as a reminder of the wise men who followed a star to find Jesus. Straw is often used to decorate homes, as a reminder that Jesus was born in a stable, while churches tend to be beautifully decorated with many candles for the Christmas morning service.

Swedes enjoy a ‘Julboard’ – a buffet-style dinner usually eaten mid-day on Christmas Eve. They may also enjoy another popular food at Christmas, Risgrynsgröt. This rice porridge that’s eaten with raspberry jam or sprinkled with some cinnamon, and is often eaten in the evening, after gifts have been exchanged.

One of the biggest celebrations around Christmas time in Sweden is the observance of St. Lucia’s Day on 12/13. St Lucia was a young Christian girl who was martyred, killed for her faith, in 304. The most common story told about St Lucia is that she would secretly bring food to the persecuted Christians in Rome, who lived in hiding in the catacombs under the city. She would wear candles on her head so she had both her hands free to carry things. According to babynames.com, Lucy means ‘light’ so this is a very appropriate name.^[2]

A very popular and unusual tradition in Sweden is that, every year since 1959 at 3pm, you can stop and watch the Disney special, “From all of us to all of you.” In Swedish, this is translated to say, “Donald Duck and his friends wish you a Merry Christmas” and about 40-50% of the entire Swedish population stops to watch it.

Swedes associate a ‘yule goat’ with the mid-winter festival and houses often have a straw goat ornament that is said to guard the house and the Christmas tree. In the city of Gävle, a huge straw goat is built every year for the start of Advent. It’s 13m/43ft tall and takes two days to put up! It has a large metal structure on the inside and is covered with straw. The tradition started in 1966.

Gifts are usually exchanged after dark on Christmas Eve, as people often go to church services early in the morning on Christmas Day. Luckily, the sun sets around 2-2:30, so you don’t have to wait *that* long. Maybe no gift is quite as ‘Swedish’ as the Dalecarlian Horse (Or ‘Dala Horse’ if you’re in a hurry.) When gifts are given, it is common to attach a funny rhyme or poem that hints at what is inside the package.

Like those in Poland, Swedes often use straw to decorate their homes during the advent season as a reminder that when Jesus was born, He was placed in a manger.

Some have sought to cast doubt on the authenticity of the Biblical account in Luke 2, suggesting that (A) There are no records of this census outside Bible and other Christian writings, (2) Quirinius was not governor until 10 years after Jesus' birth, and (D) Joseph could not have been forced to go to Bethlehem for the census, much less Mary.

One of the most widely quoted and highly respected ancient historians is a man named Josephus. Josephus records many historical details that do not appear anywhere else, yet these are not disputed or questioned, and Luke has been shown to have been significantly more reliable and trustworthy than Josephus.[3] Also, given the well-established fact that Caesar Augustus was working on a stronger, more centralized government, a census of this nature is not only possible, but very likely. There is no reason to question Luke 2 on this point.

If Josephus is correct, and so often he is, Quirinius did indeed become governor around 6 A.D., but many experts believe Quirinius held the position of governor more than once. A parallel might be seen in Grover Cleveland, who was the 22nd and 24th president here in the U.S., having served from 1885-1889 and again from 1893-1897. Undoubtedly, Quirinius held positions of authority prior to A.D.6, either as governor or as imperial commissioner. Both of these words can be translated from the Greek word used here, ἡγεμονεύω, which simply means 'ruler,' 'leader,' 'commander,' or 'governor.' There is no reason to question Luke 2 on this point.

Regarding their having traveled to Bethlehem, historical records show that the matter of enrollment described by Luke would require those away from home to return home to be counted. A Roman census would have required a woman to pay taxes, but would not have required her to travel and do so in person; so why would Mary have gone with Joseph? Maybe he knew that if he left her behind, she'd be subject of criticism and scorn. Without doubt, they would both have known that Jesus was to be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2.) There is no reason to question Luke 2 on this point.

The Biblical record of Jesus' birth has not been disproven. Jesus came, just as He had been prophesied to; just as the Bible tells us He did. But what if He hadn't? What if Jesus had never been born? What would that change? A quick look into Hebrews 2:14-18 will reveal a few of the major changes that would have happened if Jesus hadn't come.

Because Jesus came, we are set free from the power of death (Heb. 2:14). Death seems to have the final word, and it's something you cannot stop, like a train barreling down the tracks. Death is loud and creaky and rattles so loud it's hard not to flinch at the thought of it. But for a Christian, it is no more than the shadow of a fearsome reality that passes by in a moment . . . and then allows you to go over to the other side.

Because Jesus came, we are set free from the captivity of death (Heb. 2:15). It's somewhat natural to fear death, but did you know that when you live in fear of death, you actually imprison yourself? That's what Otis did in the Andy Griffith Show. But so often, we imprison ourselves by focusing on the things of this world instead of the things of heaven.

Because Jesus came, we are set free from the condemnation of death (Heb. 2:17). There's a huge difference between being free from confinement and being free from condemnation.

Jesus came, not just to set you free from imprisonment, but to set you free from condemnation. When the Son sets you free, you are free indeed.

Jesus isn't some straw goat that's only around for a short time. He's the everlasting, sinless Son of God, who offers to take away the condemnation, imprisonment, and punishment that sin brings. He has conquered the power of death and defeated the one who wields that power. His Word is trustworthy and reliable. He came, not with a wreath of candles on His head and food in his hands, but to wear a crown of thorns and to stretch out His hands on a cross in your place. He came, not so you could enjoy a buffet of foods or receive gifts under a tree, but so that you could inherit the riches of heaven...if you're willing to trust Him today.

[1] <https://traveltriangle.com/blog/sweden-in-december/>

[2] <https://www.whychristmas.com/cultures/sweden.shtml>; <https://babynames.com/name/Lucy>

[3] Geldenhuys, Norval. The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Luke. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993 (p.104)

DIG IN!

Here are some farm-fresh questions that will help you to personalize and apply this morning's message.

- 1. What did you find most insightful, helpful, or troublesome from this morning's message? Why? Be clear and specific in your answer and in your reasoning.**
- 2. What would have given Joseph and Mary comfort to face the challenges they encountered in Luke 2:1-7? (Hint: See Matt. 1:18-24, Luke 1:26-38)**
- 3. If you were going to play a 'Christmas prank' on someone, who (and what) would it be?**
- 4. If you could ask God one question about Luke 2:1-7, what would it be? Why?**
- 5. What details given in Luke 2:1-7 help set it in an actual, historical setting? Why is this significant?**
- 6. What's the best Christmas cookie?**
- 7. How have you been keeping up with your Bible reading this week?**