

Series: *THE INCREDIBLE INVASION*—December 17, 2006

UP THERE...DOWN HERE
Luke 2:1-7; Matthew 2:1-12, 16-17

I. INTRO

A. I have to confess, I'm impressed by power! I'm fascinated by huge earthmoving equipment; giant rock trucks the size of houses; how big the propeller is on an aircraft carrier. I'm amazed by the engines on fast cars and fast boats. I like to hear the stats on the most strongest people, the most dangerous snakes, the fastest computers.

1. I'll tell when I **don't** like power. It's when someone powers up on me! See, I can be all fascinated by the most venomous snakes in the world—as long as there's either distance or thick glass between me and them. I can be amazed by the power of technology—until it turns on me and ruins my day.
2. No one likes to be on the wrong end—the weak end—the defeated end—of power. If I have to get in a collision, I want it to be with an Austin Mini—or one of those dumb looking smart cars, not an 18 wheeler or a monster SUV

B. If you take even a quick tour of history, you'll find that power has been more misused than almost anything else. The people who get it—whether it's fire-power or financial power or knowledge power—will use it to somehow benefit themselves. And someone will end up feeling weak and small—or maybe dead. The quest for power is addictive. Adler described power as **the greatest human obsession**. Henry Kissinger, former U.S. Secretary of State called it an **aphrodisiac**.

1. The story of Jesus' birth is smack in the middle of the story of two rulers, King Herod and Caesar Augustus, who had, together, shaped the world He was born into. Both of them used their power to crush others and reinforce their own egos and interests.
 -But an invasion of their kingdoms had already started that would never be stopped. They had no idea, one starry, starry night, a baby would be born who would eclipse them in every way. They were very powerful and very impressive. But one day they died, and all their monuments and coins and buildings and slogans pretty much faded away. You now have to dig pretty deep to find out anything about them.
2. Everyone has power; and everyone has to deal with those who have power over us. Most of us has to deal with power in some way. Of course, then, like all people, we have to give an account for what we've done with it. The best news in the world is that the One who holds **all** power isn't like us humans. He always uses it for **our** good.

II. THE WORLD JESUS WAS BORN INTO

A. One of the most thorough narratives of Jesus' birth was written by Luke—a physician by trade. Luke writes almost like an investigative journalist. You get the sense that in the power of the Spirit, he interviewed, checked records, checked out stories—and then carefully detailed the places and leaders and circumstances surrounding Jesus birth and life. Listen to what he writes:

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them (Luke 2:1-7 TNIV).

1. Anyone here know much about Caesar Augustus? I've always known some about him—simply because of my education. But recently I've learned some fascinating things about his reign from a guy named Rob Bell—a pastor who's done a lot of historical research on this era.
 - First of all, you need to know that the Roman Empire ruled the known world of that day—from Great Britain to India. And the question is—how did they maintain that kind of control? **Power!** The power of a massive Roman army—financed by looting, taxing and enslaving the nations they crushed. A Roman army would come to a town with the banner, **Caesar is Lord.** If the leaders and people would proclaim Caesar to be lord, they'd be spared, taxed and enslaved. If not, the army would slaughter them all.
 - It was brutal, bloody cruel power and force. The Jewish historian, Josephus, says that the Roman soldiers amused themselves by crucifying prisoners. They did this in such great numbers that they ran out of space **and** crosses. Jesus' disciples were from villages where this had actually happened. One Roman general enslaved 30,000 people in the village of Magdala. Anyone remember Mary the Magdal-ene?
- a. Caesar Augustus, the son of Julius Caesar, achieved the distinction of being the first Caesar to rule the world. And because of this, the Roman Parliament declared him God Incarnate on earth! God in flesh. And he was worshipped. They declared Augustus to be one savior of the world—the one for whom the world had waited.
- b. It gets even more interesting. He was eventually called a savior and the "Son of God." To top it off, there was a 12 day celebration initiated in his honor called the "Twelve days of advent" and **advent** coins were minted in his honor.
2. Some of you have noticed that the wooded area just north of us on Anderson was recently cleared. I watched in fascination from my window as huge shovels and bulldozers came in and literally just crushed the trees and ripped them out of the soil, hauled off the logs, and made this massive pile of branches and treetops and brush. As I was working on this talk, one huge with claws grabbed scoop after scoop of branches and roots, and dropped them in this massive revolving funnel where they were shredded and spit out as mulch on the other end.
 - a. And that's what the Roman war machine was like. This big iron claw that ripped up, dumped, and shredded whole populations. The equipment used to clear the land was expensive—**someone** had to pay for it. And Caesar's war machine was expensive too. And the nations

crushed by it had the added humiliation of being taxed to **pay** for it. And if you want to know how big your empire is and how much more of the world you can conquer—well, you have to count; take a census!

- b. And that's how Joseph, a construction worker from Nazareth, gets ordered by Caesar to go to Bethlehem.

B. And that brings us to the next ruler who shaped the world Jesus was born into. Let me start off with a question: What do you do if you're **Caesar**, and you have to rule a place that's 3000 miles away—like Israel? Well, you get yourself a local king who will swear allegiance to you. "I keep you under my thumb; you keep them under **your** thumb." And because he ruled over these kings, Caesar was called **King of Kings**. Interesting title, isn't it?

-The guy Caesar chose for that job was a fierce young warrior named Herod, who was hated and feared by the Jewish people. He was half Jewish and half Edomite, and he had gotten his reputation with Rome both by slaughtering Jews and by brown-nosing Caesar. Herod was obsessed with keeping Caesar happy, because, see, without Caesar he **has** no power and authority! Archaeologists have found statues and tributes to Caesar, built by Herod, all over the Middle East.

- 1. To understand Herod, you have to know two things about him. First of all, he was a builder. An **amazing** builder. Some of you have probably been to Israel and seen the fortress at Masada.

Herod built a three storey palace with hot tubs, marble inlaid designs, Italian columns imported from Rome, frescoes. And on the roof he had a giant pool. In a place where it never rained! To fill it with water, he had collected rainwater from 17 miles away, and channeled it into cisterns massive enough to create a 10 year water supply for 10,000 people.

- a. Guess who built **Caesarea!** Herod wanted a port on the Mediterranean. The largest harbor in the world of that day was Athens—60 acres. So Herod said, "I'll make mine **520** acres!" So, get this, 2000 years ago he imported concrete from Italy that would harden underwater and poured it 80 feet down and 100 feet wide to create a man-made harbor.
- b. The list of his buildings is almost endless. He built a stadium that seated, at best guess, ½ million people; he built an amazing aqueduct, 19 miles long, to bring fresh-water to Caesarea, which he plated with white marble because it wasn't beautiful enough.
- c. One of his most spectacular achievements was the Jewish temple that Herod built in Jerusalem—simply to try to impress them into liking him. It took 18,000 workers and over 50 years. They still don't know how he did it. The stones at the base, which go three storeys underground, are massive—10' X 10' X 80'. And during the whole construction, he had all 2.3 million stones cut off site and moved into place.
- d. This guy built palaces, baths, theatres—amazing stuff—as far away as modern day Turkey! And he named a **lot** of it after Caesar Augustus. See, he was into impression management—and he **knew** how to get people indebted to him. Some experts believe that, to do this, Herod had 500,000 people on his payroll, and that he was the richest man **ever**.

- e. How? Taxes! Historians estimate that between Caesar paying for his army and Herod paying for his building projects, and the Temple tax, about 80-90% of what regular people earned was taken in taxes.
- 2. And that brings up the other side of Herod. If you disagreed or wouldn't pay your taxes, he'd have you killed.
 - a. In fact, because Herod **knew** he was not the rightful king of the Jews, he was paranoid about holding onto his power. That's why he sucked up to Caesar by naming everything after him—and killed off everyone who posed even the smallest threat to his kingdom.
 - He had 11 wives and 43 kids, and was constantly suspicious of them trying to take over his kingdom. He became suspicious of one of his wives so he eventually had her executed. He ultimately had 3 of his sons executed because he thought they were plotting against him. He killed off a whole group of religious leaders because they disagreed with him. He was a ruthless, cruel, murderous old cuss.
 - b. Now, given that background, listen to Matthew's record of Jesus' birth.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.

"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied...Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him (Matthew 2:1-5; 7-8 TNIV)."

-Can anyone understand **why** Herod was disturbed? He'd spent his whole **life** trying to impress Caesar enough to keep his power. And even Caesar joked about his paranoia.

Augustus said, "It's safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son!" A little play on the pork thing, there. Herod loved **up**, and feared and hated **down**. So, just imagine how things get stirred up when Magi, kingmakers—probably from Persia, bring their caravan into town saying, "Where's the **real** King of the Jews around here!?"

-And everyone in the vicinity had reason to be afraid too.

They'd seen Herod when he got in a bad mood! And all his cronies knew that if he went down, **they** went down!

- c. The narrative tells us that God supernaturally guided these men to Jesus in Bethlehem—and then away from Herod to protect them.
 - Herod's fury is seen in the slaughter of all the children in Bethlehem 2 years of age and under. What Herod did totally fit the pattern of his whole life: blackmail, kidnapping, torture, execution—or brown-nosing, if he had to.

- C. But there's a bigger story than that of Caesar and Herod. Someone is coming to this planet who will ultimately outshine them both. Caesar may **think** he's lord, but he's not. Caesar may believe his own press and read his advent coins and **think** he's the great one who is to come, the bringer of peace and the savior of the world—but he's **not!** Herod might look at his palaces, his titles, his accomplishments, his buildings and **think** he's the king of the Jews, but he's not.

In the back corner of both kingdoms, right under Herod's nose, a young Jewish teenager is carrying a baby; Immanuel, God with us, Prince of Peace, Wonderful, Counselor, Almighty God, Savior is coming. There's a whole new empire coming; a new kingdom and this one Caesar and Herod have built on the misuse of power--crushing and oppressing people—it's goin' down!

-They—and all the other people—had no idea that it was God who showed up that night. We wouldn't have understood it either if we had been there. He was a baby, powerful because He was God, but helpless.

Wrapped so tight in rags he can't even move his arms and legs—vulnerable. Seemingly easy to find and kill off. Unprotected. It would seem so, anyway. And I doubt if either Herod or Caesar August had read that ancient writings of Daniel about what was going to happen.

-It's there, you know. It came in the form of a dream, sent by God to Nebuchadnezzar, another person who ruled the known world of his day. Daniel interpreted it—you can read it for yourself if you want in his book. But it listed all the kingdoms in order that would show up here—right down to the Roman Empire. And then it predicted that the Messiah's coming would hit the Roman Empire, the most fierce of all the kingdoms, and ultimately crush it. This prophecy was fulfilled in such precise detail that skeptics think someone got ahold of Daniel's book and inserted it later.

-But the truth is—God knows everything in advance. And He's at work—even when evil people are in power!

III. **HEROD...KING? CAESAR...LORD?**

- A. Now, I know that this doesn't seem like your usual warm, fuzzy Christmas story. But I think it's important to know that, just like our world, Jesus came to a world that had impostor gods and impostor kings. Both Caesar Augustus and Herod knew exactly how to fool people, get people indebted to them and reinforce their power and their reputations.

1. But, truth is, their kingdom was all about power—about themselves, really. About getting their will done—and getting rich and feeding their egos in the process. Jesus' coming was ultimately a **direct** challenge to what they—and those who followed them--spent so much time and money building for themselves. What happened was much, **much** more than a story about two Jewish kids who had a baby under questionable circumstances. The Christmas story is told in direct defiance of a world system where Caesar claimed to be god, **savior, lord**, and king of kings; and where Herod had claimed David's throne.

-So, first Herod tried to kill him off; and then the following Caesars tried to squelch the Jesus' movement that followed, where His followers laid their lives on the line saying, **Caesar** isn't lord. **Jesus** is Lord! **Jesus** is the Son of God. **Jesus** is Savior and King of Kings—the one the world has been waiting for!

2. One day, around 30 A.D., all the card-holders, all the big shots and kingdom builders of that day joined together to rid the world of this One who dared to challenge their power. They chose crucifixion to deal with him. It seemed to be the most effective way to slaughter revolutionaries and de-motivate their followers. So they nailed Jesus alive to a cross.

-The problem was, they couldn't keep him down. Jesus', as God, was immensely powerful! But his power was different. His power was earned through humility and sacrifice. His power spread, not by taxing and crushing and impressing—but through changed hearts. It was a kind of power the world hadn't seen before. It was the power of **love!** You can kill people—but you can't kill love. Love **always** wins!

-Jesus, this baby, born in a stable in Bethlehem, raised in poverty—preached a revolutionary message.

His message was about a **different** kind of kingdom that gave instead of taking, and was run by compassion instead of cruelty, and set people free instead of enslaving them. Not only wouldn't Jesus **stay down**; His message couldn't be stopped.

-See, Jesus was raised from the dead—and He was...and IS...alive and well. Augustus and all the other Caesars die. Tiberius? Died. Caligula? Dead. Nero, s, Vespasian, Titus, Domitian—all dead. Do you see a trend? But **Jesus is alive.**

3. Recently, Lori and I saw video footage of two professional skydivers—the best of the best—doing an aerial presentation—where that have smoke coming from special shoes—and they make a giant X in the air—each traveling at about 150 mph. In this case, they collided—and this red cloud of blood surrounded them for a split second. Only one survived—and he lost both legs.

-The high speed collision of Jesus and his followers was a little like that mid-air collision. Violent—and bloody. In fact, it appeared from the outside that the Caesar kingdom—and the Herod kingdom—would win. The persecution was horrible enough to make you shudder as you read about it. But love just **couldn't** be stopped.

-Followers of the Caesars put animal skins on them and sent them into the coliseums to be torn apart by wild animals; they chopped off their heads; they dipped them in wax and burned them alive; they imprisoned and tortured them, exiled them, nailed them upside down—burned the teachings of Jesus, the One they loved and served, but **they wouldn't be stopped!**

-And this kingdom Jesus died to start, and rose again to establish did just what the prophecy in Daniel said it would. It knocked the kingdoms of this world flat—and will one day **fill** the earth. He started small—tiny, fragile—but He absolutely **rocked** the world. And that happened because He was no ordinary king. It was a supernatural invasion! He was...and is... **God With Us!**

- B. There are a few things I think you and I need to know this Christmas—in this life we lead—and what we really want out of it. What I really want you to think carefully about is which kingdom you have aligned yourself with. See, like all true believers down through history, you'll have to make a **conscious** decision about that.

-See, Jesus totally flipped power, as we know it. Power, when it's used effectively, is not this crushing force that drives people to their knees, or impresses people into following. In Jesus, ultimate power became powerless, this subtle working of God that goes for longterm influence through changed **hearts**. Hearts that love; that care; that give outrageously. **That's** the kind of power God has chosen to use—and bless.

1. The comparison between Caesar with his massive armies—and Jesus, this tiny baby born in filth and poverty seems almost laughable. It would appear that choosing Jesus' kingdom would be like choosing the Argonauts to win the Superbowl, right? Okay, bad choice—but you get my point.

a. So—how does this fit us? Truth is—you and I have a kingdom; a little fiefdom of some kind. Everyone does. It's the place where your will is done.

And in this space, we're tempted to use our power in some of the same ways Caesar and Herod did; by impressing others, but steamrolling over the opposition, by thinking what and how much we build is symbolic of how important we are. We get confused about what all our accomplishing, accumulating, and building is **really** all about.

-Like the rulers in this story, it can very easily become about getting a bigger and bigger and bigger piece of the pie. Conquer, tax and count; conquer, tax and count.

-And sometimes we build and build and build—not because we **need** more, but to impress. To let everyone know precisely where we are on the food chain. And we can get pretty weird about protecting this little kingdom too—I mean, we're not above killing off a reputation or two!

b. And if we're not careful, we can turn a blind eye to the people who got stepped on. The people who went without so we could stack more on our mountain. And sometimes we miss the real cost to ourselves; the cost in terms of time and relationships and health and conscience.

-And that's why Jesus can be so intimidating to us. We're scared to death He's going to intrude, or ask us to give some away, or that we're going to lose some of our authority, or our power.

And if we're not real careful, life can become all about building high, **higher, bigger, stronger, greater, more, MOST!**

c. If we get into this mode, well, then life takes it's natural course. And just like all the kingdom builders who have ever lived--Caesar Augustus, Herod, Hughes, Ford, Carnegie, Getty--we die. Someone has to pry our dead, cold rigor mortis hands off of it. And our little kingdom gets fought over by the next group of little emperors and kings.

d. You **have** a kingdom. I have a kingdom. The Bible says that one day all these kingdoms get handed in and become the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible says—**Jesus** said that if you buy into the world system on this and you try to hang onto it, reinforce it, and save it all for yourself and your ego, you will lose. You **will** lose. The only way to win is to voluntarily live with open hands before Jesus while you have a choice.

-Say, "It's not mine; it's yours. I know that now. I'm not god—**You're** God. I'm not king; **You're** King of Kings, Lord of Lords. And I need to ask you—have you **ever** in your life actually done that and really, with all your heart, meant it. Jesus, God Incarnate, said, "If you will honor Me and put me first in your life—all these things you want, all these things you need, all these things you dream of for your life will be given to you as well. It may not look like it now, but **love wins. It always has, and it always will!** And I think you want to be on a winning team!

2. I know thinking about truly letting Jesus lead our lives gives most people a nosebleed. It's hard! It feels so...**out of control!** But think about it for a minute. If we don't cooperate—let Him guide—let **Him** be God—then, who really becomes God. The answer is—we do. And it feels kind of cool to control the shots—at least for a while. But what about when things **aren't** going well, and other people are powering up on you, using you, squishing you? What about when life is totally out of control and it's being run by the bullies of the world? What about when bad news comes—and it will?

-Jesus came as **God with us**, not to be our Good Buddy in the Sky. Our magic genie we call out of the bottle occasionally to rescue us; but as One who could love us—and make us loving people. One who could guide us on a path where we **can't** see around the next bend. One who could give us **real** power—**real** life. And He can only do that if we stop playing God—and let Him be God; if we stop ordering Him around, and let Him tell us what we need to do. That's **hard**. I know it is. But that's where the power in life comes from. That's when you and I can really make a difference.

-If we choose not to, well then we end up fighting Him over every little scrap of life, and it's a fight you and I can't win. And why would we want to fight with Someone who humbled Himself and gave His life so **we** could have life?

- a. Remember how Jesus talked about how He came to bring the Kingdom of God—and it was really, really, **really** Good News? Kingdoms always have Kings. When Jesus invited people to be a part of the **Kingdom** of Heaven, he was inviting them to come under his loving, kind, compassionate leadership, his Lordship. The **only** leaders people in that culture knew were brutal ones—where if you **didn't** submit, you got crushed. Believe me, Herod's kingdom and Caesar Augustus' empire wasn't about the people under their leadership. It was about **them**. Their egos. Their monuments.

-But not Jesus. Jesus said, "I've come to give **you** life—way more life than you can hold. I've come to give you strength, hope—the blessedness that you're looking everywhere else for. Unlike all these other kinds and lords and predators—I know you and love you. And if you'll come to me, come under **my** leadership—I'll give you rest.

- b. Now it's up to you. Caesar ignored Jesus—until he could no longer ignore him or his followers. Herod tried to kill him off. But most people just didn't make room for him. They didn't want Caesar oppressing them, taxing them, squashing them—I mean, they **knew** he wasn't lord or the son of god or a savior. They didn't like Herod—they knew **he** wasn't the rightful king.

And they didn't want Jesus either. And they *missed* the life they could've had.

-So, I want to just ask you with all my heart, will you make room for Jesus—rightful King; would you at least try letting Him lead?

That's His rightful place—and if you don't let Him have it—you'll stuff it with all kinds of other junk. And then one day, like Herod, like Caesar, like every person who's ignored Jesus—put up the **No Vacancy** sign and sent Him off—you'll realize how insane it was to do that; to turn away the One Person who really, *really* loved you.

3. One final thought—and this is for you who like many people for the past thousands of years, have found yourself crushed, oppressed, bilked, run over by the world system and those who run it. Maybe you're a single parent—and between time demands, work, bills—and just *life*, you think, "Is it going to be this way forever?" Maybe you're in a really *really* dark spot you can't crawl out of, or you spend your days in cubicle land and it all seems pointless—and you think, "I'm *tired* of Caesar winning!"

-You need to hear the word of every oppressed person—the slaves in Jesus' day—those who suffered in slavery on this continent, and those still stuck in poverty and sweat shops and ghettos; **Caesar, Herod, Hitler—whoever uses power to crush people—they doesn't get the last word; God does!** Because, you see, one night in a backwoods corner of an empire, a teenage Jewish girl had a baby who was **God with us!** -And that baby grew up—and changed everything. And now *love* is the new power. Love wins. **Love** wins. I hope you're on the winning team!

IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS

I hope this morning you will think very carefully about what you're building with your life—and who it's for. Where does most of your energy and best creative thinking go to? I hope you'll take a careful look at how you use your power and influence. Who's in charge? Really? If it's *not* Jesus—it really *needs* to be. So, would you let Him take His rightful place?

And when you find yourself oppressed; and life feels like you're pushing a big rock up a hill—and all the drones around you are mindlessly repeating, "Caesar is Lord. Hail Caesar"—may you remember that Caesar—as important and powerful as he was—died. And may you remember the point of Christmas; that a Savior has been born. And may you remember that no leader on this planet has the last word. God does. And Jesus lives!