SO WHAT: The world was filled with sin and secular power struggles. The period of marked by the silence of God had stretched to some 400 years. And then, God began to move in an unexpected way, in an unexpected location, through two of the most unexpected people, to bring hope and deliverance into a dismal world.

If you didn’t know the story…if you didn’t understand beforehand the significance of this night…it would seem like any other silent night. Nothing fancy going on; nothing exciting to look forward to…just one more night like so many others. That is pretty much what was happening in the lives of folks when we pick up the story.

Luke sets this story during the time of Emperor Augustus. Caesar Augustus actually plays a larger part in this story than we often give him credit. You see, his role goes far beyond ordering the census which moves Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. Caesar Augustus was the great-nephew of Julius Caesar, who actually adopted him, which is why he is in power. The Roman Senate voted to give him the title, “Augustus”, making him the first Caesar to be called “Augustus,” which means “holy” or “revered.” Up until that time it had been reserved exclusively for gods. So there are a couple of things going on here…the last word of God had been spoken through one of His prophets some 400 years earlier, which led some to begin wondering if God had abandoned them. Plus, you have the leader over the known world who was a self-proclaimed, and widely accepted, god and savior. So in this time of divine silence and of humans striving to be divine…the stage is set for God to move and act in mighty ways.
We might expect that God would act in mighty ways…in ways that would make Hollywood jealous…but that is not God’s way. When viewed through normal, everyday logic, Joseph and Mary were insignificant nobodies from an insignificant nothing of a town. He was a poor village carpenter and she…well, she was most known at this time as being an unwed, expectant, teenager. They were peasants; they were poor; they were un-educated; they were of no account. No one in their right mind would have given them a second glance. And yet, they captured the very essence…the very definition…of grace. God chose them to bring His Son into the world. It was not to the proud and powerful that the King of kings was born…but to the poor and powerless.

In Bethlehem, the accommodations for travelers were primitive…even at their best. The eastern inn was the crudest of arrangements…but for Joseph and Mary there was not even that. It was likely a nearby cave where travelers kept their animals that Joseph and Mary sought refuge. The coldness of that winter night was outmatched by the coldness of the world…as no one would make room for them despite Mary’s obvious need. Imagine being Joseph and the hopelessness he must have felt seeing Mary in the pains of labor amidst the stench of the barnyard, while surrounded by people’s indifference…think of the humiliation, the sense of helplessness, and the feeling of shame that must have been present by not being able to provide for his beautiful wife during this time! This was no Fair Barn type of accommodations…it was wretched and scandalous. But it was there, in unspeakable conditions, that she gave birth to a baby boy and then placed him in a manger…which is a fancy word for an animal’s feeding trough. No child born into the world that day could have entered the world with lower prospects. But don’t forget; that is not only where Christ was born…that is where Christianity was born…in a sense of need and in the midst of human insufficiency.
There is a phenomenon, that if you place two in-tune pianos in the same room and play a note on one while not touching the other one, the second piano will gently sound the same note. This is called “sympathetic resonance.” R. Kent Hughes describes the incarnation by saying the Christ’s instrument was his humanity…and it was exactly like ours in every way except that he had no sin. But the amazing good news of the incarnation is that whenever a chord is struck in the weakness of our lives…it resonates in his. He knows our hurts…our pains…our struggles…our joys…our happiness…our everything. Hughes says, “But the truth is, any note we play, whether a melody or a dirge, a minor key, or a discordant note, has sympathetic resonance in the heart of Jesus Christ.” Do you need sympathy? Do you need someone to understand your loneliness…your pain…your quiet suffering? Do you need someone to know what you are experiencing and going through? That is part of the good news of great joy…Jesus’ life resonates with ours. He is with us at all times…in all things.

He is our strength when we are weak and he is our joy when all is well. But he is also the one who takes away our sins. This little baby…born in the most anticlimactic way to the most unlikely of people…came into the world to be our Savior. And beyond that…he also is our source of life…here in this world, but also beyond. The hope he brings is that this life is not all there is…for all who believe in him and accept him as their Lord and Savior there is a greater place awaiting…a place where we will live in the presence of God and with the believers from all time…for all eternity.
Let us rejoice at this news…and let us open our hearts to receive Jesus Christ. And may we all listen as our lives then resonates with his.

Amen.