

Isaiah 9:2-7
Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-20

December 24, 2020

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

COUNTING ON CHRISTMAS

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, as we listen to the familiar story of your coming among us as a child of flesh and blood, open our minds and hearts so that we may hear the wondrous events with new understanding, with wisdom, and with joy. Amen.

It was a time of disease, political upheaval, domestic strife and polarization, with a growing wealth gap. And in the midst of all of those challenges, there was a census to be completed.

Yes, it was 2020! And this census wasn't declared by Emperor Augustus, but by the U.S. Constitution, Article 1, Section 2: "Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective numbers." The 2020 Census officially began on January 21, 2020, in Toksook Bay, Alaska, but the planning and publicity began many years before. A year ago tomorrow, the California Census Bureau tweeted these Christmas greetings: "Merry Christmas to everyone celebrating today! Remind loved ones to participate in the #2020Census this spring! A complete count will uplift our families and our communities. #CaliforniaForAll #MerryChristmas." Louis Medina, Director of Community Impact for Kern Community Foundation in Kern County, California wrote a short article for the December 2019 Kern County (California) Family Magazine called "Christmas Can Help Us Prepare for the 2020 U.S. Census." The article begins with these words, "The Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke shows us how a census can alter the course of world events." Medina then makes some interesting comparisons: "Fortunately, census taking has improved dramatically since Mary and Joseph's day. First, you don't have to go anywhere for the census. No having to travel by donkey while pregnant to be counted! [Also] whereas the census of the Bible was all about Joseph and Mary's lineage and personal information, the U.S. Census is completely confidential." Mr. Medina concludes his article with this interesting appeal to Kern County residents: "Please do like Mary did in the Bible and ponder these weighty things in your hearts. Make sure everyone in your household gets counted in next year's census — including all children. That little one living with you could grow up to be a world changer someday."¹

I completed the census form online in less than ten minutes. When I hit submit, I thought, "That was easy! I wonder what I forgot to fill out." But then my printer spit out a confirmation notice and I didn't give it a second thought. Nancy and I didn't have to drive for two days in order to be registered in New Orleans. We weren't inconvenienced in any way. And I hope that I and all other North Carolinians will benefit from the 2020 Census counting.

What a contrast to the decree from Emperor Augustus that “all the world” should be enrolled in a census. First of all, the citizens of Galilee and Judea hardly benefited from that census. Our 2020 Census will determine our state’s representation in the U.S. Congress for the next ten years. Emperor Augustus’ census was administered to collect taxes to feed the masses in Rome and pay for the occupying armies in places such as Galilee and Judea. Second, Joseph and Mary, along with lots of other people, had to make a long, hard, and potentially dangerous journey of about 70 miles from Nazareth in the north to Bethlehem in the south. We can drive 70 miles in an hour. Traveling on foot (or donkey?) up and down the Galilean and Judean hills and detouring to the East beyond the Jordan River in order to avoid the area where the Samaritans lived added miles and hours and days and dangers. Try to imagine making that trip when nine months pregnant or worried about your pregnant wife!

The gospel writer Luke is known for adding historical markers to his story, such as letting us know about Caesar Augustus and Governor Quirinius. But Luke has a greater purpose for including these figures. He draws a sharp contrast. On the one hand, there is the Emperor sitting on his throne in Rome, the capital of the empire, exerting his authority and power and ruling by fear, who decrees that “all the world” should be registered. It’s an imperial claim by Augustus. In reality, “all the world” meant the Roman Empire. Granted, the empire was large, but it hardly covered “all the world.” On the other hand, there is the announcement from the angel to the terrified shepherds, “Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for **all the people**: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” (Luke 2:10-11)

Caesar Augustus was sitting on his throne in Rome. The baby Jesus was wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger in Bethlehem. Instead of all of the pomp and circumstance of political and religious power, prestige, and position, Jesus’ birth is so very ordinary. In fact, the birth of “a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” is reported in thirty-one words: “And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” (Luke 2:7) It was a time of disease, political upheaval, domestic strife and polarization, with a growing wealth gap. And in the midst of all of those challenges, there was a census to be completed. But also in the midst of all of those challenges — 2000 years ago and today — there is “good news of great joy.” Jesus Messiah, Savior, and Lord is born in Bethlehem!

One of my favorite paintings is by a Flemish Renaissance artist named Pieter Bruegel the Elder. It is called The Census at Bethlehem (also The Numbering at Bethlehem). He painted it in 1566, following the very harsh winter of 1565. Despite the title, the scene is of a winter day in a typical Flemish town. You can see the painting on the screen right now. Because there are so many details to look at, let me describe a few of them. People are going about their everyday business. Children are having a snowball fight. A pig is being slaughtered. There is a man sitting on the ground as he laces up his ice skates. In the distance the church stands on one side of the pond, surrounded by houses. The ruins of a castle stand opposite. In the foreground there is a group of peo-

ple gathered in front of a tavern and inn. One person is obviously paying some money to a tax collector while another clerk records some information in a notebook. Almost lost in the hustle and bustle of the everyday scene, there is a man carrying carpenter's tools, leading a donkey on which his pregnant wife is sitting. They are making their way to the place where people are being registered and paying their taxes. Pieter Bruegel the Elder has depicted Christmas Eve (there is a Christmas wreath hanging above the tax collectors) in a busy but otherwise ordinary Flemish village. And into the midst of that ordinariness the baby Jesus is born!

A week ago, ABC News online reported that the word "Unprecedented" was named the People's Choice 2020 Word of the Year by dictionary.com. The word is defined as "without previous instance; never before known or experienced; unexampled or unparalleled."² Well, 2020 has certainly been "unprecedented" — so much so that we're tired of hearing the word "unprecedented." But the "unprecedented" events of 2020 and this Christmas season have played out in the midst of the ordinariness of our lives. The pandemic has certainly made our day-to-day lives much more challenging, but we still have to contend with all of the day-in-and-day-out activities, just like the people in the painting of the Flemish village.

But, in the midst of this "unprecedented" year, as we continue with the ordinariness of life and its demands, including this year's census and its implications for the years to come, we still gather to celebrate the one truly "unprecedented" event — "good news of great joy for all the people — the birth of our Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord."

Jesus is the one we're counting on this Christmas!

Let us pray: Good and gracious God, on this holy night you gave us your Son, the Lord of the universe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, the Savior of all, lying in a manger. On this holy night draw us into the mystery of your love. Join our voices with the heavenly host that we may sing your glory on high. Give us a place among the shepherds that we may find the one for whom we have waited, Jesus Christ, the Messiah and Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

NOTES

¹Louis Median, "Christmas Can Help Us Prepare for the 2020 U.S. Census," December 1, 2019 at www.kerncountyfamily.com.

²Olivia Eubanks, "'Unprecedented' named People's Choice 2020 Word of the Year by dictionary.com," December 16, 2020 at www.abcnews.com.