



SERMONS THAT WORK

Christmas Day (II)

Who Counts at Christmas?

[RCL] Isaiah 62:6-12; Psalm 97; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:(1-7)8-20

We begin the story of Christmas with a sentence from scripture that's not quite true.

“In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.”

Well, almost all the world. Everyone who had some kind of position in society, even a working-class one, like Mary and Joseph, went to be registered. Anyone who could conceivably pay taxes was on the emperor's list and had to report in and be accounted for. It was sort of the first-century equivalent of Big Brother/Big Data. You're not getting anywhere in America without a driver's license, and you couldn't get anywhere in first-century Palestine without being on the emperor's list. If you were taxable, you would be counted.

“All went to their own towns to be registered,” Luke says. Well, again, not quite all.

Luke himself tells us that in the next paragraph: “In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.” The shepherds did *not* return to their hometowns to be registered. They were on the very bottom rung of society. They couldn't pay taxes and had fallen so far between the cracks of the Roman Empire that they weren't even expected to. They were nobodies. When it came time for the registration, to show up and present their names and papers to the government, no one looked for them. They quite literally didn't count.

And who among all the people in the Bible were the first to hear the news of the birth of Christ? While everyone else was in the city, busily submitting to TSA screenings and handing in forms in triplicate at the DMV and making sure their health insurance card was in their wallet, the shepherds were out in the country with their sheep. They were not worried about whether there would be room at the inn. The inn was never an option for them.

And out of the perilous freedom that was their world, free from what Michael S. Bennett calls “the economic hamster wheel that so engrosses the rest of us,” comes something earth-shattering. “Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them... suddenly there was

with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom [God] favors!’”

Why are we always surprised that it is the last and the lost and the least to whom God brings the Good News first? The people who were rejected and scorned and abandoned, people on whom society relied for manual labor and to endure the danger of scaring off predators from the sheep, saw the heavenly host and the glory of the Lord. David was a shepherd who became a king, and so was Jesus. But where David stayed a king, Jesus’ identity as the Good Shepherd was always more important to him than any regal crown or royal rule.

“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?” Jesus says later in the Gospel of Luke. Shepherds know what counts, and that is counting every sheep, making sure every single one is safe and home and cared for, no matter how wayward and stubborn.

To the empire, the shepherds didn’t count. But to God, they did.

And to Jesus they did, to the point that he took on their name and their ministry, calling himself the Good Shepherd. Why did he do that? Perhaps in gratitude for their next actions in the story: “When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them... The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

Imagine what it would feel like to be told by society and the government for your whole life that you don’t count. You don’t matter. You aren’t even worth the trouble to write down your name on a list so you can pay taxes.

And then, imagine being told by the very heavenly host that you *do* count, in a much bigger world—the Kingdom of God. The shepherds could have stayed in the fields with the sheep—they knew the territory there, they had a job to do there, and they knew they weren’t welcome in the city anyway. But they had both the raw courage and the profound generosity to share the message, to share the Good News, with people who had never valued them. That is grace. That is joy. That is a life transformed by the Gospel.

Who do you dislike because you know they don’t value you? To whom do you feel like a number and not a name? Are there people in your life who dismiss you because of your age, the home you live in, the country of your birth, the work you do, or the person you love? Who makes you feel like you don’t count? That may be the very person whose soul is starving for want of the Good News. That may be the very person who is so trapped by a system that lends them status and importance that they could not imagine what it means to be loved without labels. That may be the person who needs you, a messenger of God, the most.

There are people in your life right now who do not know that God loves them. There are people in your life right now who think they don't count. Someone has to tell them they do matter, that God does love them, and you are that person.

Maybe that's a scary idea or seems like hard work or you'd like to think it's someone else's job. Maybe *you're* the one who feels like you don't count. Maybe you're the one for whom the love of God is more a nice idea than a visceral experience. Either way, you're a shepherd. You're abiding in the fields, and the heavenly host has something to say to you: "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."

Hear the message of Christmas and write it on your heart: you count. You matter. You are important. God is so in love with you that God sent God's only Son to live and dwell among you, to teach you and heal you, to die for you and rise for you. And the deeper you take that knowledge into you, the freer and braver you are to tell that to every single person you meet.

"In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered." Except for the shepherds. Because they had nothing that the empire could use. They were of no value to Rome the political oppressor or Rome the economic juggernaut. They didn't count.

Find the ways you don't count to political oppressors and economic juggernauts. Find the ways you can't fit in as a cog in the machine, because your light is too bright and your shape is too strange and your life is too real. That is where God loves you the most.

You count. You matter. God proclaims that today to the whole universe in the birth of the Christ Child. Don't ever forget it. The Kingdom of God needs you.

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