Christmas Eve

December 24, 2020

Everything is different this year.

You don’t need me to tell you that.

But there’s one thing that’s the same, and that’s the story we hear on Christmas Eve.

There is one detail of the nativity story according to Luke that I think we’re prone to missing, no matter how many times we hear it: The census.

We know about censuses. We did one just this year.

Ours is mandated by the Constitution, for the purposes of apportionment — determining how many Representatives each state gets in Congress — and to aid in the distribution of federal funds.

When our census form arrived in the mail, I filled out the information online. It was all over and done in about 5 minutes. It was easy and convenient.

It occurred to me later that, years from now, when the demographic information from the Census is released, anyone who is curious would be able to see that I have had a different address for 5 of the 6 censuses I’ve been counted in.

I’m hardly alone on that, I’m sure. Relocating — really, travel in general, is far more common and easy than ever.

The census that Luke tells us about was anything but convenient or easy. Because the emperor could do pretty much anything he wanted, and because emperors had a tendency to demonstrate their power as a means of keeping people in line, this census required people to return to their hometowns.

When we don’t notice the detail about the census, or if we assume it’s an unimportant detail, then we don’t think about what it would have meant for people in a time when travel was generally by foot and often dangerous. For anybody who lived in a different place than where they grew up, it would have meant a day or two of walking, as well as finding family to stay with, and missing work for a few days.

Luke tells us that Augustus decreed that “all the world should be registered.” Which is an incredibly egotistical thing to say, really, because the Roman Empire did not encompass the whole world.

But saying that the whole world should be registered makes you sound pretty impressive and powerful, and a Roman census was all about the power held by a small number of people.

By knowing how many people lived in a particular place, not only did Rome determine how many people they ruled, they could find more tax revenues, money that was often used to enforce the peace and provide comfortable lifestyles for the few who had any power. But even more than that, a census reminded people of who was in charge, and reminded people of the extent of the power the Emperor had over their lives.

In the midst of it all, the most ordinary thing happened. A baby was born.

But this was no ordinary baby. His birth was announced by angels and the heavenly host.

They didn’t appear to people who counted, like the chief priest or the governor or the emperor, but to shepherds —people who in general were so poorly regarded that their testimony was not admissible in court and some towns even barred them from entering city limits.

This is the reality of the story we hear tonight. Those on the outside of things are the ones who are chosen by God to receive the good news that the Messiah had been born. And it’s the story we hear throughout the rest of the Gospels. The story of Jesus surprising people by entering into their lives and healing them, offering them compassion, forgiving their sins, even to the point of forgiving those who were crucifying him. Those on the outside of society are brought in. No one is excluded.

The Christmas story — from the angel appearing to Zechariah and telling him that his wife Elizabeth would have a baby, to the angel visiting Mary, then the shepherds — is a story full of surprises and full of God moving in mysterious, unexpected ways, through seemingly unimportant, unimpressive people

It’s as if God delights in finding new ways to surprise us, new ways to come to us, new opportunities to bring us wonder and joy, and new things for us to ponder in our hearts.

In the midst of a census that demonstrated the power of the Emperor, Jesus was born. For him, everyone counted. He showed us that “true power comes from love and sacrifice and hope, not from fear and taking all we can while we can.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

And in him, “the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

This is indeed good news of great joy for all the people.

1. Eric Barreto, *Connections,* Luke 2:1-20, Connections with Scripture, p. 168 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Titus 2:11 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)