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Christmas Eve A
Peace, Seattle
December 24, 2010 epk
Luke 2:1-20

WHO COUNTS?

God of mystery and grace, in the face of this Child we behold your face, and in the light of his presence we see ourselves anew. Open our eyes, enlarge our minds, deepen our faith that you are here with us and for us in the Babe of Bethlehem. Amen.

Sisters and brothers, grace, mercy and peace from Emmanuel, Christ the Lord. Amen.

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The 2010 census figures are in and it's official: the USA has a bona fide population of 308,745,538 persons,[1] (give or take a few 100 thousand).

They say the growth of Washington state in the last decade will earn us a 10th seat in Congress and move us up to the position of 13th most populous state.[2]

What's so important about census numbers?

- They not only affect our collective voice in Congress, they also determine how and where **$400 billion dollars** will be spent annually on infrastructure and services like: hospitals, job training centers, schools, senior centers, transportation & public works projects, and emergency services.[3]

COUNTING PEOPLE COUNTS, and that's why so many institutions, agencies, and advocates support as complete a count as possible—because in a world where money follows the numbers, **numbers matter**.

Tonight St. Luke tells us that the macro-context of Jesus' birth was a census initiated by the Roman Emperor Augustus.

And though historians dispute whether or not Luke had all the facts straight about this census, there is no disputing that Caesar Augustus had a penchant for getting accurate nose counts of his people. He knew the value of counting Rome's citizens and its non-citizens—for purposes of military conscription and for leveraging taxes[4]—two things that empires need to survive.

Now we didn't come here tonight to hear about the 2010 census or (heaven forbid) taxes. We came to hear the story. But that's where it begins—and here's the point: After framing the story of Christ's birth by referencing the powers-that-be and their agendas for the world, Luke does something unheard of: **he ignores them…completely.**

Instead of taking us to Caesar's palace (not the one in Las Vegas, the one in Rome), Luke turns the emperor into window dressing for the real story he wants to tell—a story of two solitary travelers and the village that becomes the birthing place of God's son.

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[1] From *The Seattle Times* http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/politics/2013729567_apuscensusregionalgrowth.html
[2] From *The Seattle Times* http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/localnews/2013729560_census22m.html
[3] See US Census website for more information: http://2010.census.gov/2010census/about/why-important.php
[4] Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah.* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), p. 549

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It's as if he's saying: TRUE, THIS OTHER, BIGGER WORLD WITH ITS BIG NAMES AND BIG AGENDAS EXISTS, BUT THAT'S NOT WHERE GOD IS FOUND THIS NIGHT. LET ME SHOW YOU WHAT I MEAN…

The birth of Jesus takes place in a world quite different than our own, and yet, in very basic ways, much LIKE ours; a world in which counting people counts.

One of the big challenges in any census is counting the people who don't have an address;
- who don't have an apartment or house to call home;
- people who live out of their cars, under the freeway, in tent city;
- people who are migrants for one reason or another; people who don't want to be counted;

PEOPLE WHO DON'T COUNT.

And those kind of people are at the heart of this story Luke tells us tonight.

Mary herself, mother to this newborn child, doesn't qualify for the Emperor's census form. She's the wrong gender.

Yet, it is Mary to whom God sends his heavenly messenger Gabriel;
- Mary who, with a faith and maturity beyond her tender years, assents to God's plan;
- Mary who lifts her voice in praise of a LORD who fills the stomachs of the poor while sending the rich empty away.
- And it is finally she, Mary, who carries the enfleshed promise of God, Emmanuel, to full term, bringing him into the world in the most crude and un-bidden circumstances.

And what about those shepherds? Do their names go on the census form? Not likely.
In the time of David sheep herding wasn't a bad job, as jobs go. You could do worse.
But by the time of Jesus shepherding was among the most disparaged vocations:
- dishonorable because a shepherd spent every night away from his household;
- immoral because he grazed animals on other people's property;[5]
- and unclean both ritually and actually because of the conditions he had to contend with.

Truth be told, the shepherds of Luke's story are not the idealized rustics of the Christmas crèche we've made them out to be, but social misfits, ne're-do-wells, untrustworthy marginal characters.

I ask you: Can you think of a less likely bunch to whom you'd entrust the most important news in the history of the world!?

Yet, it is precisely to these shepherds that the announcement of Messiah's birth first comes.

What happens tonight, at Bethlehem, will reach a whole new level 30 years later, as Jesus, taking God's message public, hangs out with fisherman, eats with prostitutes and tax collectors, creates a community of hope centered around God's passionate love for this world, and finally meets his end (or is it a beginning) nailed between two criminals, on a tree.

What is God trying to tell us here?
- In a world where wars rage and economic prospects are uncertain;
- in a world steeped in ethnic bigotry and toxic fundamentalism;
- in a world filled with personal tragedies and brokenness;
  God chooses to become human among people who don't count.

[5] Richard Ascough, New Proclamation. Augsburg-Fortress, 2000. P. 43.

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The story of Jesus' birth flies beneath the world's radar, among people who, from the world's perspective don't matter, don't count, but who, from God's perspective, do.

Those people include the least, the last, and the lost of this time, for sure.
And those people include you; those people include me.

If you've ever felt invisible to God—FEAR NOT!

If you've ever wondered whether God would bother to know your story, to see your striving, or to sense your longing, your joy; your anger or grief— **FEAR NOT**!

If you ever thought that God was remote, silent, untouchable, unreachable—FEAR NOT!

When Mary birthed Jesus, and he opened his eyes for the first time, God's view of this world, God's window into you and me and what it means to be human, changed forever. Forever.

With this little, vulnerable bundle, wrapped in swaddling clothes comes a simple, profound message: YOU COUNT—EVERY ONE OF YOU COUNT!

You count for me, God says, not for what you might be able to do for me, not for what I can get from you, not because numbers count, not even because of your faith in me (if you have faith in me.)

You count simply because I love you – and I so want to make this love real in your life.
So I've come all this way, in a way I'm hoping against hope you will recognize.

This, dearly beloved, is God's good news for all the people.

And when we take it in—I mean really take it in, eat and drink it, allow it to breath and live and move in us, then, you see, the world changes for us, too.

Poet Gerard Manley Hopkins says it so wonderfully:

Of her flesh he took flesh:
He does take fresh and fresh,
Though much the mystery how,
Not flesh but spirit now
And makes, O marvelous!
New Nazareths in us,
Where she shall yet conceive Him,
Morning noon and eve:
New Bethlems, and He born there, evening, noon and morn.

Amen.