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Christmas Eve C
Peace, Seattle
December 24, 2015
Luke 2:1-20

BEYOND THE NUMBERS: LOVE OVERCOMES FEAR

Our world is preoccupied with numbers.
- Economic numbers
- Polling numbers
- Sales numbers
- Population numbers

Our world is obsessed with numbers—and for good reason.
For numbers—data—can tell us a lot about the state of the world in which we live.

So we pay attention to numbers.
We track...
- profit margins and miles per gallon;
- homeless people and housing units;
- transit users and bicycle commuters;
- quarterback ratings and baseball stats.

We count migrating salmon and resident orcas.
We measure the depth of the snowpack and the height of CO_2 emissions.

Every government, business, and educational institution; every for-profit and non-profit entity uses numbers to break down, comprehend and communicate its story.

In the world of Empire, people are numbers to be managed.
Empires make decrees calling for data, because you can only manage what you can quantify.
Therefore—order a census; count the bodies; mandate the taxes; exert control.
Caesar signs the decree and Quirinius sees it done.

This, curiously enough, is where Luke begins his story of Jesus…with numbers.
A DECREE WENT OUT from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.

"All the old history is by decree," writes Walter Brueggemann, and in that realm authority is exercised by fear.[1] It's the way things are within the dominant version of history.

But then Luke shifts, and he begins to tell us what no Emperor could predict: that beneath the dominant version of history another version is unfolding. A new story under the radar and off the grid.

Two from Galilee, indistinguishable from all the others, make their way to Bethlehem.
And there, in the still of the night, when all the bean counters are fast asleep, the two become three, as Mary delivers her firstborn son.

GOD IN THE FLESH he is—the sign we've been waiting for; proof that our Creator has not abandoned this world or given us up to our own devices, but is with us, and with us for good.

[1] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination,* Second Edition. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) p. 103.

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Numbers tell us a lot about our world. But they don't tell us everything.

Into a world preoccupied with numbers, data, statistics, God enters unnoticed, uncounted.

Beneath the surface of the Empire's dominant version of reality another version emerges—unrehearsed, surprising, bold—a SUB-VERSION—that tells a different story.

In this SUB-VERSION it is not Mary's age or poverty that matters, but her willingness to embrace God's plan. In this SUB-VERSION it is not Joseph's pedigree that carries the day, but his relentless determination to see the journey through.

In this SUB-VERSION, an ARMY, indeed, has been called upon to deliver a message,
- but their proclamation is not of WAR, but of PEACE;
- their medium not FEAR, but JOY;
- their means not WEAPONRY but SONG!

CAN YOU HEAR IT?!

Truth be told, it's been awfully hard to hear with so many sirens assaulting our ears of late.

Mass shootings reached new highs in 2015; and the death of unarmed innocents has reached epidemic proportions. The locations of the most egregious acts are imprinted now on our psyches:
- Charleston
- Roseburg
- Chicago
- Paris
- San Bernardino

To assuage our fears some have sought to out-duel one another with calls for violent retribution. Proposals banning whole populations of people from these shores have been touted as reasonable solutions. But far from allaying fear, these proposals only trade one kind of fear for another.

The world into which Jesus was born this night was a world shot through with fear.
But on this night God's messenger speaks a word aimed at stemming that tide.

BE NOT AFRAID, the angel declares. For I AM BRINGING YOU GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY FOR ALL THE PEOPLE. And in chorus the heavenly host replies:

> **GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST, AND PEACE TO GOD'S PEOPLE ON EARTH!**
>
> "There is no hint of these lyrics being heard by any of the managers of the census.
> They just [keep] counting and assuming that all numbers come in sequence and finally add up.
>
> [Ah, but] this new beginning is not among those who operate the old order; it emerges [instead] among the victims of the old order… The newness announced…is not a newness that fits the old categories, for it is precisely the old categories that are now shattered.[2]

[2] Brueggemann, p103, 104.

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FEAR NOT! THIS DAY A SAVIOR IS BORN. AND THIS WILL BE A SIGN FOR YOU:
YOU WILL FIND A BABE WRAPPED IN SWADDLING CLOTHES AND LYING IN A MANGER.

> "If the thought of finding God in the horrendous circumstances that bedevil our world seems strange," writes Johann Arnold, "perhaps it is because we are out of practice looking for God there.
>
> In good times it may be easy for us to call God "Father" and acknowledge God as the source of our blessings. But when tragedy strikes we too often 'Look upon God as our last and feeblest resort. We go to God because we have nowhere else to go.'
>
> We forget that God is right here, waiting for us to turn to him, no matter how dire our situation. We forget the bold words of the Messengers: FEAR NOT![3]

In this context of FEAR–both REAL and IMAGINED–Luke points us toward <u>a narrative of love</u>.

Lying there at his mother's breast, safe, for the moment, from all worry and harm, eyes locked on eyes, love flows.

One day words will try to describe that love, so vulnerable, so complete; but for now, at the manger, on this night, none are needed, save one: I am not alone…we are not alone.

In Bethlehem the Sacred Mystery behind our existence has bound our stories to his own as never before, enlisting us in wonder, enlisting us in life.

The message of Christmas is not about the absence of fear, or the avoidance of risk—there is <u>no such thing</u> as a risk-free life.

The message of Christmas is about risk <u>accepted</u> and <u>fear overcome</u>. God proving in this little babe, just <u>how far</u> God is willing to go to begin the journey of making this broken world whole.

Let us pray…

When our hearts were bound in fear, O Lord, you came to be with us in Jesus, casting out our fear with your perfect love. Thank you for this gift. Thank you for your love. Stay with us Lord, all the way through this life. And at the last, join our voices with all those in all places and all times who glory in your love. In the name of Emmanuel. Amen.

[3] Johann Christoph Arnold, *Watch for the Light*, pp. 153-154, edited EPK. The quote is from George MacDonald.

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Before my daughter Naomi will go down into the basement she must have the assurance that someone will go with her.

It's not enough to say DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT—THERE'S NOTHING DOWN THERE.
You have to go with her. As long as you're with her she is fearless.

God is more powerful than the dark forces of this world that want to keep us in fear.
God is more powerful than the principalities and powers that want to keep us in fear.