

*A sermon given on Christmas Eve 2010  
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates*

### **A Census Taken**

It's cold and gloomy outside. With freezing rain on the roads, and construction obstacles at the church, you are to be congratulated on having made the journey here successfully. But if you think your trip was a challenge, consider the fate of four characters in the Siberian Far East, making their way from Irkutsk to Vladivostok, when their truck broke down several times. Eight days and 3,000 miles later, their exposure to subzero temperatures was so prolonged that they went into hibernation. Varya, Manyasha, Lyalya and Lyusya are Russian circus bears, and by the time they completed their frigid journey they had begun deeply to hibernate and were in no mood to do tricks! Despite being served massive quantities of strong tea and chocolates, the four refused to perform and went back to sleep. But you – you made it through the obstacles of Advent, and here you are, with or without strong tea and chocolate, awake and alert. Congratulations, Merry Christmas!

Speaking of difficult journeys: *It came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.... And all went to be registered, every one to his own city. Joseph also went ... to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.* [Lk 2:1-4]

The Christmas story opens to us with a journey and a census. The Emperor Augustus declared that everyone should be counted, in order to be taxed. So they went to be counted, they went for a census. We had a census, too, in 2010. Our every-ten-year census of the United States of America, with its seemingly endless postcard announcements, telling us it was on its way. And finally the form arrived, posing all its crucial census questions: Who are you? Where are you? Where are you from? How many are you? The census wants to know.

In the summer of 1990 my family moved to the western New England mill town where I had been called as rector. We arrived at the big old 1860's rectory, which had been uninhabited for a year. The ten rooms sat empty, devoid of all that makes a house a home – no furniture, no toys, no music, no voices, no laughter. There was nothing in the whole house – nothing except one large piece of mail sitting on the kitchen counter. It was the U.S. Census bureau questionnaire. It sat there in this empty shell of a house. It sat there seeming to say, Is there anyone here to count? Is there anyone here who counts?

It's important, this census business. Every ten years we hear the same debates. How will the data be gathered? How will homeless people get counted? Will immigrants understand the process? How can the count be

accurate given general indifference or outright hostility? Still, the questions drive the process: Who is here to count? Who is here who counts?

Political? Yes, districts and representation get decided by the census. Economic? Yes, taxes and government aid are apportioned by its results. But it's more than that, too. A census speaks at some deeper level not only about who is counted, but also about who counts. If I am counted, I must matter. If I am counted, I must be somebody.

Sometimes we are not sure about that. If my job gets cut, do I count? If my relationships fail, do I count? If I am too old, too poor, too lonely, or just plain too ordinary ... do I count? Do I count for anything? There are times in the lives of most of us when we feel something like that census form in the empty rectory – a sort of hollow shell with no real life. Just a small voice saying, "Is there anyone here who counts?"

What about that census of Caesar's so long ago? Who is it who matters in that day? Who, in those days, is called upon to sharpen the number 2 pencil and fill out the questionnaire?

Caesar Augustus himself? Oh, yes. The great emperor of Rome, nephew of Julius Caesar. The most powerful person on earth. Yes, he counts.

What about the innkeeper? You know, the one who has to turn this poor family away for lack of a room, but does provide them a spot in his stable. He is a merchant of note in his community. Yes, he surely must count.

What about Joseph? Not rich or famous, but a tradesman. He probably counts, too. Yes, he had to make the journey for the census, so evidently he counts.

And how about the shepherds? Well, no, actually. Did you know that in the tradition of that day shepherds are considered to be disreputable types? They are not much higher on the social ladder than lepers and bandits. No, they certainly don't count.

And Mary, the woman great with child – what about her? No, women don't really count in the culture of the day either. And especially a poor maiden like this one. No, she doesn't count. Not she, nor her baby. A child born in a shed. A birth as common as the day. Doesn't count for much at all, really. Not for the census of Caesar. Not in the eyes of the world.

But in the eyes of God ... oh, in the eyes of God! This holy night we learn how different it all is, in the eyes of God! "Fear not," says the angel, "for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord." A savior is born – announced first of all to these no-count shepherds. A savior is born – born to an unknown and ordinary Jewish girl. A savior is born – born in a shed.

Between Caesar Augustus and the child born in Palestine, who would have had any question as to which was the significant one? Surely Caesar Augustus would tower above all in the records of the ages. While a child born in one of his provinces would be lost in the shadows of time. But it has not been so. Great as he was, Augustus is now a footnote, while the name of that child is spoken by millions, across the centuries, with reverence and love. [cf.

*Interpreter's Bible*, VIII, p. 49] Caesar Augustus sent forth a census decree. But God also sent forth a decree – which was a Son.

In that decree was the divine answer to the question of who counts, which is, of course, every child of God. Each one. The extent to which we do not believe it, or do not reflect it in our lives or in the life of the world, only reminds us bitterly of the gulf between God's unconditional love and our own human brokenness. The hungry and the homeless, in points far and near. Victims of warfare and terror, termed 'collateral damage', in Afghanistan or Mumbai. Women and girls sold into modern slavery in Thailand or Chicago. The child barely educated in Appalachia or in Cleveland. Those who in the eyes of the world apparently do not count are a rebuke to our sinful blindness, collective and individual. They serve to accentuate what God would have us remember: that each one matters. Each of us is a beloved child of God. Every one of us counts.

This is the night, my friends, that God takes the ordinary and makes it holy.

This is the night that ordinary, untrustworthy shepherds are entrusted with the greatest news of all time.

This is the night that an ordinary, small-town girl becomes the channel of the world's salvation, the very mother of God.

This is the night that our ordinary lives, yours and mine, are declared to be sacred. For unto us is born this night a child called Emmanuel – God with us. By entering our lives God told us, in the best way God knew how: You count. Christ the Lord is born this night. He came for me, and he came for you. No matter who you are. The census is taken, and you count.

In the name of the newborn Christ. Amen.