

"Registration"

Luke 2:1-5

Quick – what do you think of when you hear the term "registration?" *Comments?* Maybe you're like I am, and what flashes through your head is registering for classes in college or graduate school. On that fateful day, you're herded into some large gathering space, routed through lines; asked a million questions; offer all sorts of paperwork to whomever asks for it; forced to sign large checks for thousands of dollars in tuition and board and all the other fees that seem to accumulate, and at the end of it all, instead of exhilaration and relief, there's the trip to the book store for more misery! 'What have I just done,' I remember thinking at various stages throughout the ordeal!

Registration; another set of experiences come to mind involving the registration of automobiles – there's that driver's license tests, and getting your license plates and such. In California, it's such a zoo, that you can call in and schedule an appointment, so that you don't end up waiting for several hours in a line that snakes outside and around the building, as it did the first time I arrived to complete paperwork.

Registration; it's all about being counted, or added or shifted from list to list; financial aid lists, class lists, Registrar's lists for the payment plan, the add/drop list; maybe it's the list to see the academic advisor or to sign up for health coverage. Or what about the list of those interested in student government or tag-football or the Peace & Justice Committee?

Registration; Luke's account of Jesus' arrival in Bethlehem, begins with a decree, in which the Roman emperor declares that "all the world" should be registered. That's all the known world, of course, corresponding to the world according to Rome; powerful, ambitious, ever increasing, full of intrigue. In fact the reign of Octavian, called Augustus, was one of absolute power and control – he was a despot who understood the need for a strong hand, the need for rebuilding morale and for order and stability. His rule from 31 B.C. to 14 C.E. brought peace, economic prosperity, improved communications, stable government and a sense of renewal for the empire. Literature of the Augustan age celebrated the birth of a new age – a strong sense of a new beginning, in which the old era of upheaval and warfare ended and a new era of peace and prosperity beginning. (*Backgrounds of Early Xnty* E. Ferguson Eerdmans, 1987:19-23) It was said of him in many Greek inscriptions, that he was "savior of the whole world." His birthday was celebrated as the birthday of "the god [that] has marked the beginning of the good news through him for the world." (Priene inscription 40-42 as found in Anchor, p.394)

With a new age of stability, comes the need to finance government, and whatever governments count and catalogue, you can be sure they will soon enough tap as a source of revenue. The goal was to acquire an exact knowledge of the resources of the empire using the count of the census, so that the supervision of tax collection could proceed. Augustus apparently excelled in these matters. (*Backgrounds* p.72)

It's one of those moments in the biblical story where the policies and procedures of the political world impinge upon the narrative, moving it in a particular direction. For Luke, the decree for a universal census, brings Jesus' parents up out of their hometown, Nazareth in Galilee, and into Bethlehem of Judah. In this way Jesus, the son of Joseph, who is from the house and hometown of David (v.4), has the requisite ancestry, for the Messiah according to prophecy in Micah 5, was to come from Bethlehem. (cf. *Feasting* S. Cooper, Yr C, vol 1:119)

In our own experiences of this holiday season, there are all sorts of journeys involving various layers of registration; long travel to airports, through security checkpoints, dealing with parking regulations, trying to reach the gate with the right size luggage in tow – with boarding pass, and id in hand. Perhaps we can begin to appreciate the incredibly inconvenient and difficult journey Joseph and Mary are undertaking here; very pregnant and uncomfortable, not really sure of where they'll be

staying, moving along crowded roads as others make their way to and from various towns and villages. The trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem was about 85 miles by the most direct route that ran through Samaria (Anchor Bible *Luke I-XII*. Fitzmyer 1981:406); 85 uncomfortable, slow miles to be registered for the purposes of the Roman state; moving from the familiar comfort of home out onto the road, almost like refugees or immigrants, forced to move along, finding shelter elsewhere, along their way.

One of the most striking things about Luke's account of Jesus' birth, is that Luke's distinctive pattern of sharing careful historical detail whenever possible, is here found to be out of kilter with historical fact... There is no record of a registration of "all the world" under Augustus, and no record of an earlier census of Judea exists. Such a census for tax purposes probably wouldn't have occurred during the time that Judea was under the charge of Herod, because the collection of taxes was delegated to him! Add to this that the Roman system of registration did not generally require one to return to one's place of birth or family origin, and we are left scratching our heads about Luke's account. Did Luke simply refer in a general way with vague recollection, to a census that can be dated to later, in 6 C.E. during Quirinius' legate in Syria. (Anchor, 399-401), as he was looking back on events? We're can't know for certain...

But what we can start to notice is the way in which this Lucan context of Jesus' birth serves as a sign pointing to his future role: complying with Roman law, as part of an oppressed people, dealing with the decree of an emperor who was known as a restorer of peace, Jesus is identified as traveling to be born in the city of David, of the lineage of Joseph, all part of what was expected for the Messiah. This One so longed for, so anticipated as the Bringer of Peace, the Anointed one able to usher in the new reign of God, is nearing his destiny as his parents travel to Bethlehem, during another powerful reign. For Luke, proclaiming the odd, astonishing arrival of a new world and a new time, in the midst of this old chronological, Roman-ordered time, is one of the ways to underscore how God moves through the powers that be, to achieve God's purposes. The real bearer of peace and salvation to the whole world is the one whose birth occurred in the town of David, and as we shall soon see, was made known by angels and witnessed by shepherds. By relating Jesus' birth to a worldwide census, Luke hints at the worldwide significance of that birth. And the humble circumstances of Jesus' birth offer a clear contrast with the majesty and acclaim of the one named Augustus, the one whom the rest of the Roman world regarded as its savior. The child born under "The Peace of Augustus" – *Pax Augusta* - will eventually be hailed as "the king, the One who is to come in the name of the Lord," resulting in "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven," according to Luke 19:38. (Anchor, p. 394)

Let me suggest that each of us might also find new ways to meet God during our Advent journeys to Bethlehem this year, by placing ourselves in this great story. You have with your bulletins, a copy of a sheet called a "registration form" and I'd like to invite us to participate in our own "registration process" here in the midst of our worship. Imagine that you join this journey, from your own hometown, carrying with you all the hopes and fears that most of us struggle to balance in our day-to-day lives. What are the hopes you have for the road ahead? What would you place before God as a longing, a need, an intention for your travel during these holidays or for the year ahead? Take some moments now, before we move to the communion table, to share your hopes and prayers as our advent pilgrimage continues to unfold – if you would, fill in as much as you care to on the form you have and when you're finished, bring it up and place it in this black binder up on the worship table... *Offer time – have Michele play music in background etc.*

As you begin, let me share this description about the nature of hope:

Hope opens something in the human heart. Like shutters slowly parting to admit a winter dawn, hope permits strands of light to make their way to us, even when we still stand in cold darkness... hope reveals a landscape beyond us. With hope, closely held interior thoughts are gently turned outward; deep desires, perhaps long hidden

in secret corners of our heart, might be lifted up to the light. At times, hope peels back the edges of our imagination to free what waits underneath – a changed life, a new resolve, a yes, pregnant with possibility... (P. Hawkins as quoted in *The Uncluttered Heart*, B. Richardson, Upper Room, 2009:29)

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