

## Our Heart's Treasure

Read Luke 2:1-20

I entered Penn State in the fall of 1967. The tuition was a whopping \$600 for each ten week term! It sounds like a pittance today but for my parents it was a sacrifice. And what did I gain from all that high priced education? I remember almost nothing from the courses I took but a few isolated facts and a few academic experiences. But there is one thing that became indelibly etched in my mind, my social security number. On a campus with roughly 36,000 students, your name may be important to you and a few friends, but as far as the administration of the institution goes, you are not much more than a number.

I remember with some amusement my late brother-in-law Larry who was educated by Jesuits in New Orleans telling about his very strict math teacher who knew his students only by their seat number. Larry wasn't performing up to snuff so one day the professor said, "You number 33 boy, go home and tell your parents not to waste money on your education because you don't have what it takes to make it." Of course Larry went on to become a Colonel in the Army and later to earn more than one Master's degree.

Treating people like numbers to be counted is often spiritually destructive and can be an affront to God who made people in God's own image to be in a relationship of love and trust. There are several Bible stories that illustrate the point well.

One is recorded at the end of II Samuel. King David had just come home from a key victory in battle over the Philistines. Then for some reason, Ist Chronicles tells us that Satan incited David to take a head count. David commanded that a census of all of Israel be taken so he could see how many fighting men were at his command. In spite of his general Joab's resistance to the project, David insisted. In the end, 800,000 troops were counted. God was not pleased and 70,000 innocent people died in a pestilence of judgment. The census was not sinful, but the pride that motivated it and the drive to find his own self-sufficiency apart from God was. Over and above any king appointed to govern

the chosen people stood the sovereignty of God, who was and still is, the King of kings.

Another famous story about numbering people is the story of Gideon who first had to overcome a deep sense of inferiority before he would agree to lead the chosen people into battle. After negotiating matters with God and finally consenting to lead the people, Gideon amassed a fighting force of 32,000 men. God said the army was way too big. God sifted and sorted until the force was down to 300. God explained the strategy by saying he did not want Gideon to think he was victorious by his own hand and the might of his army. God wanted Israel to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that their victory was due to the presence of God among them. Gideon was being protected from pride and taught to give God the glory. The result of obeying God was a resounding victory for Israel. You can read the full account of Gideon in Judges 6-8.

So what's all this got to do with Christmas? Our text begins with another bean counter named Caesar Augustus. There he sat atop the most powerful empire in the world, or as he would have said, over the entire civilized world. All the parts he didn't rule were viewed as inconsequential and barbaric. The great Caesar commanded that a census be taken, most likely to insure that he was milking enough tax money from his subjects (this sounds strangely familiar doesn't it?). The census would demonstrate to all that he had the power to command it and to demand more money as the reward of his subjects' obedience.

How was Caesar to know that he was being used by God to get pregnant Mary and her husband Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem so that an ancient prophecy could be fulfilled that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem? Caesar's sovereignty existed inside a much larger one. Rome's story was a part of a much larger story of God's power and of salvation for God's people. Several years later, God would even use a dreaded Roman cross as the instrument to set millions and millions of people free down through all the remaining ages of human history.

Against the antagonism of Caesar toward God's people, we see the lowly protagonists, Joseph and Mary and the unborn Jesus, powerless to resist Caesar's decree but powerful enough to obey God. Their obedience to Caesar was preceded by their prior obedience to God. On the surface, their journey from one small town to another within the vast Roman Empire seems at best totally insignificant. In hindsight and in faith-sight we know that their little journey was pregnant with salvation. It was much more significant than Caesar's decree. And we now know it was the beginning of an expansive movement that has taken the Gospel of Jesus Christ and his salvation into all the world.

As though to add a little further spice and humility to the story, God brought some shepherds front and center. They were probably not much more than pre-pubescent boys from common families who pulled the night shift at the sheep fold. An angel of God appeared to them. You would've thought the angel would have been sent to Augustus in Rome with the message, "You have no idea who you are dealing with."

But no, the angel came to lowly shepherds just doing their job, keeping watch. Nice touch that, "keeping watch." That's exactly what Jesus tells all disciples: "God typically shows up at an hour you least expect; stay awake, keep watch." Their first response was abject terror. What else would you expect? Picture yourself with insomnia, in the den watching late night TV, all doors and windows locked, when suddenly a blazing figure appears before you. You'd probably be more than just a little nervous is my guess.

On the first Christmas the angel began pretty much as they always have to begin when angels talk to humans: "Don't be afraid! Fear not! I have good news." A common human response to an angelic visit is to fall down on our face as though dead. We always need some reassurance that the message is for joy and not for sorrow. I wonder if the angels get together around heavenly camp fires and tell stories about how they terrified poor human beings by simply showing up.

On that first Christmas night the message was one of great joy: "To you is born this day in the city of David, a savior, who is Christ the Lord." Go see for

yourselves. Go find the baby. You'll know that what we say is true then. And just for dramatic flair, the whole heaven erupted with angelic praise to God. This was no ordinary night hanging around the sheepfold. With every ounce of youthful exuberance they shouted, "Let's go." And they ran and they ran, until breathlessly they arrived and found everything just as the angels had said they would. And they told anyone there that night all that they had seen and heard and everyone was amazed.

But Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. What a treasure Mary is to us all. She treasured the things of God. And she was humble enough not to become a know-it-all. She pondered everything. She knew she had been caught up in a huge, holy, divine story. She had a front row seat known as pregnancy, but there was so much, much more to come, so much more to comprehend, so much that was too great to fathom, because the story God tells is like that. It's huge and encompasses the whole creation and everyone and everything in it.

I remember our friend Ron saying he had a friend who said, "What's the big deal about Christmas? It's the same thing every year." NO! No it's not. It is the same story that when you ponder it and treasure it in your heart as did Mary, it gets deeper and deeper and deeper, until you come to the same place as did the angels and the shepherds, praising God: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace among those who have received God's favor."

As our beloved carol has it, "He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness and wonders of His love..."

I've been a pastor nearly forty years and I just realized I've been making a mistake all this time. When I meet someone and they say, "What do you do for a living?" I say, "I'm a pastor." And they say, "Oh really; how big is your church." Quickly succumbing to beancounter's disease, I'll say something like, "Well, in 1960 it was over one thousand members, but we are much smaller now. We only have about 165 people on our rolls and even fewer who are active participants."

Right here, right now, before you all I repent. That's the totally wrong answer. I'm going to find a way to say in all sincerity, my congregation is enormous, huge, and grand. I serve a group of people who treasure the things of God in their hearts. I serve a congregation who are not afraid to ponder the wonders of God's kingdom, who don't pretend to know all the answers to everyone's questions, who don't believe they have the inside track on every thought in God's mind. I serve people who really believe that Jesus is Lord. I serve a people who talk to the Lord in prayer, not just as a formality but as a life line.

My people are looking to be surrendered like Mary, who long to be receptive to all that God wants to do in their hearts, minds, and lives. How big is my church? It's really too deep and wide to measure. And I will never again reduce any of you to a mere number on a membership role. When it comes to people, bean counting so as to provide a statistic is abusive and depersonalizing. You are better than that.

You dear people are the beloved of God through the Lord Jesus Christ, who was born in lowly estate so that each and every one of us self-doubting Gideons will become emboldened to grow up and follow Christ wherever he leads. And in Jesus' I wish you a very, merry Christmas.