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Numbers 1:1-4, 17-19; Revelation 7:9-12; Luke 10:17-20  
“Unto You – Registered”  
Year A – Advent Midweek 1  
December 4, 2019

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Have you ever noticed that different churches have many different ways to take church attendance? Some churches only take note of which members are absent so that they can reach out and encourage their people to attend. Other churches only pay attention to the total number of people in worship and continually seek ways to increase that number. Still other churches ask people in worship on a Sunday to sign a card or booklet to indicate that they were there, much like we do here.

As I thought about this, I found it interesting that the people of God are always being registered in some way, shape, or form. It’s what we find in the Bible. If you go back far enough, all the way back in the Garden of Eden, the head count was fairly simple; there were only two people! But as their family increased, of course, the number of people grew. Unfortunately, however, they lost their faith and belief in God, and although there were a ton of people, the number of *faithful* people were very few, only eight souls who remained faithful to the God who had created them—Noah, his wife, his three sons and their wives. That’s why God spared them when he flooded the earth.

After the flood, though, the world’s population began to grow again and people spread. And that’s when God chose just one man, Abraham, to set in motion the plan of salvation he had first announced way back in Eden, that through Abraham’s family he would bless the whole world. His family was few in number to begin, just Abraham, his wife Sarah and, eventually, their son Isaac. But more were to come. In fact, God took Abraham outside one night and said to him, “‘Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’ And [Abraham] believed the Lord, and [the Lord] counted it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:5-6).

A couple generations later, when Abraham’s descendants moved to Egypt to escape famine in Canaan, when Joseph was in charge, there were just 70 people. Fast-forward four hundred years, though, and there were more than 600,000 fighting-age men, which probably meant there were a few million people of Abraham’s descendants total. No wonder Pharaoh had been concerned about how large the Hebrew nation was getting! But it wasn’t too large for God. He led this mass of people out of slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land.

And as they went on their way, now in freedom, the Lord said to them, “Your fathers went down to Egypt seventy persons, and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars of heaven” (Deuteronomy 10:22). It was a fulfillment of that promise that God made to Abraham long before. And yet they still continued to grow. Once they were settled in the Promised Land, the Israelites filled it. And the kings of Israel would often register their people or tally up the number of those able to fight.

All this to say, that centuries later, when the events surrounding the birth of Jesus commenced, it began, appropriately enough, with a census. A registration. Another counting. The story of Jesus’ birth in Luke’s Gospel begins with the words, “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town.”

The Roman emperor wanted an accurate register of all his subjects. Joseph was from the family line of Israel's great king David, so he and his betrothed wife Mary went to Bethlehem, where Joseph's family was from, the birthplace of David. This little family, with a child on the way—a holy Child—set out from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be registered, to be counted—one, two and when Mary's son was born, three.

And then when Jesus began his ministry, there was of course some more counting involved. Jesus chose twelve disciples. He healed ten lepers, only one of whom returned to give thanks. Two blind men called out for mercy and Jesus healed them. He took five loaves of bread and two fish to feed more than five thousand people. With seven loaves and a few fish he fed more than four thousand people. And he raised Lazarus from the dead after four days.

But then came the day for which Jesus was born, the day when Jesus himself was going to be registered in a different way. And this time it wouldn't be by a Roman emperor, or a king, or even by his own hometown. No, he would be counted by his enemies. As the prophet Isaiah once said, "He [would be] numbered with the transgressors" (53:12). And he went to Calvary with two criminals and was hung there. Three crosses, three victims, one, two, three.

We start our Advent journey this evening with this thought of being registered, and all the various ways God's people have been counted through the years. But it's most important to see that what we celebrate at Christmas, what we prepare for in Advent, is that Jesus came, and he came to be registered in the most unlikely of ways. Jesus was born in Bethlehem because of a registration, so that one day he could be registered among sinners like us, even though he himself was sinless. And the reason he was willing to be counted like this is because we were counted like this. And unless Jesus gave himself in our place, the only thing we could ever expect from God is for him to treat us like the sinners we are. Without Jesus, there would be no grace for us, no forgiveness, no life.

Too often we count all the wrong things for all the wrong reasons. We count our money, which is a good gift from God, until we begin to trust in it more than we trust in God. We count our friends or our social media followers, as we look for ways to be affirmed or approved by others. We count material possessions and the ways we attempt to secure a comfortable life here on earth, but then we find those things taking up space in our hearts and minds, as we constantly think about them or desire them, pushing God off to the side. We even count the number of things on our "to-do" list, or on our family calendar, especially in a busy season like this one, confusing busyness with importance.

But for all our misplaced trust, our idol worship of possessions and popularity, for all our chaos and our self-centered worry about "Number One," for all of these countless sins that cause us to be counted as nothing but a sinner before God, Jesus allowed himself to be counted among lowest of the low and nailed to a cross. Jesus carried our sins in his own body, suffering the penalty of death for those sins, the penalty that should have been ours. A sacrifice for the sake of the entire world. And for the sake of his Son, God has forgiven our countless sins.

And after Jesus' death on the cross, you could say that the counting began again. One, two, three. On the third day after his death, Jesus rose from the dead, conquering sin, death and the devil. Three enemies defeated so that you, when you were baptized, would be numbered with the saints in glory forever. God chose you to be his own child that day you washed clean. And what's more, *God's* registration, *his* census, took place long before the decree of Caesar Augustus or any other king. Scripture tells us that God chose us in Christ "before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him" (Ephesians 1:4). Your name was "written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb" (Revelation 13:8).

There was this one day when Jesus' seventy-two disciples returned from the short-term mission journey that Jesus had sent them on, where they were proclaiming his kingdom and

healing the sick and casting out demons. They were so overjoyed, maybe even a little overly proud of themselves, but they couldn't help but share all of it with Jesus. "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" (Luke 10:17). And even Jesus, who later felt some joy on their behalf, agreed that they did indeed have authority over all the "power of the enemy," and nothing would ever hurt them (10:19). But then Jesus said, "Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (10:20).

And that's what truly matters. That's our focus this Advent night. That *your* name is registered. That *you* are counted as one of God's. That because Jesus your Savior was born as a child to save *you*, that because he allowed himself to be numbered with the transgressors for *your* sake, one day *you* will be able to stand before his throne among "a great multitude that no one [can] number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages ... crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" (Revelation 7:9-10).

You will be there. You too can rejoice that your name is written in heaven. You're already registered. And you won't be there because you *earned* your place. Instead, you will be there because you have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. You will join that uncountable multitude before the throne of Jesus, the One who was once born in Bethlehem as a child, because he has registered you as one of his own. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. **Amen.**

(This sermon adapted from the *Creative Communications* materials for the series, *Unto You* 2019.)