



COUNTING THAT COUNTS

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For over 100 years, the Salvation Army has used their red kettles to collect change at Christmastime. The money they collect helps feed over 3,000,000 people at Thanksgiving and Christmas. That takes a lot of loose change. Which is why it takes so many bell ringers at so many stores. It's a cold, tiring, thankless job.

Which is why I was happy to hear this story. On Black Friday last weekend, the Salvation Army in Springettsbury Township, Pennsylvania, got a great surprise. When they picked up the kettle from in front of the Kmart store, they dumped it out to count the money. And there among all the nickels and dimes, they found a solid gold Krugerrand coin from South Africa, worth over \$1,000. They might have thought someone had dropped it in by mistake, but the donor had carefully wrapped it up in a very ordinary looking dollar bill. Packaging it that way let everyone know the gift was intentional, and it added an element of mystery and surprise. And it was a huge thrill for the people who discovered what was wrapped up inside it.

I love that, because to me, that is a picture of what Christmas is all about. Jesus came to earth wrapped in the packaging of a very ordinary baby. He didn't look like the Son of God. There was no halo over him like the paintings have. But he was a very intentional gift, and God invites us to the thrill of discovery as we get to know who he really is.

And the thing about the way God wraps his gifts is that there is always more to discover, always more to wonder at. I've prepared a lot of Christmas messages, and you would think eventually there would be nothing more to say. But every year when I come back to it, I am amazed to find that God has more surprises hiding in the text that I hadn't seen before.

Sometimes it's in the ordinary dollar bills. It's in the wrapping. The architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe once said, "God is in the details." There is profound truth in that statement. The more you examine the least likely details of the story, the mundane facts you think are less important, the more you see they contain solid gold.

One piece that I have been unwrapping and discovering more about is why God sent Jesus WHEN he did. Luke mentions some information about the timing that seems incidental at first, but when you really stop and consider it more carefully, you find God

in the details. Given the whole scope of human history, what made God pick the date he did for Jesus to be born? We know he must have had reasons, because God never acts randomly. The Psalm writer says,

Psalm 75:2

You say, "I choose the appointed time."

God does everything deliberately – not by accident. Paul gets even more specific about this when he writes to the church in Rome and says,

Romans 5:6-7

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

Jesus came at just the right time. Exactly the right time! The puzzling thing is, it looked like exactly the wrong time. Stuff was happening in the world that made it a highly inconvenient arrival. If he had come just a few months later, Mary and Joseph would have been married and unscandalized by a birth. If he had come a few years later, Herod would be dead and wouldn't try to kill him. Even if he had come a little bit later, that would have seemed preferable, because then the census would be over and a very pregnant Mary could give birth at home instead of off in a stable.

Here you have the most important event since the creation of the world, a moment God has planned with the greatest possible care and precision. If any point in time should look like everything was perfectly orchestrated, this is it. And yet it doesn't look any less messy and complicated than any other day.

How do you think about God's timing in your own life? Do you question why he allows things to happen when they do because life is so messy and different from the way you would plan it? Revisiting the timing of Christ's birth can help us with our own expectations of God. I take comfort in knowing that his most critical work in history happened in a setting that looked all wrong. Because that means there's hope that he is also at work in my life when I can't see him.

Luke gives us some background on what was going on when Jesus was born. The words are familiar, but let's take a look:

Luke 2:1-5

About that time Caesar Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Empire. This was the first census when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone had to travel to his own ancestral hometown to be accounted for. So Joseph went from the Galilean town of Nazareth up to Bethlehem in Judah, David's town, for the census. As a descendant of David, he had to go there. He went with Mary, his fiancée, who was pregnant.

Next year, the U.S. will be conducting a new census, and for the first time, it will be high tech. They've gone from using paper maps to GPS locators to plot out addresses. A very sophisticated and expensive system was custom built for the census takers, and like all

good technology, when it was first delivered, the government realized it wasn't going to work the way they thought. So that has meant spending more money and revising the plan.

The ancient Romans would have just shaken their heads at the whole thing, because they had perfected the art of census taking long before computers. We still have statistics from their counting that go back over 500 years before Christ. They loved recording numbers and seeing just how large the empire had grown. For Rome, the census was a symbolic way of separating themselves from their barbarian neighbors. It was a mark of civilization. And it was a way of maintaining control over places like Judea.

We don't know much about how most Jews responded to this particular census, but there's no doubt it was unpopular. We know that a later census conducted by this Quirinius character caused a Jewish revolt. It made people angry enough to take to the streets. But it was an unsuccessful protest. Rome was too powerful and squashed any opposition.

So you have this strong foreign leader with his own agenda, implementing his own plans that God's people were unable to resist. They were helpless.

And yet – the census ended up playing a key role in the birth of Christ. I think one of the reasons God chose to send Jesus during a Roman-driven census was to show **God's purposes override everything.**

Proverbs 19:21

*Many are the plans in a man's heart,
but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails.*

God hijacked the census. However worldly and prideful Rome's intent was for it, God overwhelmed it and said, "I'm going to allow this to happen and use it to my own ends. Something good is going to result from your actions that you wouldn't have intended in a million years." And what seemed like bad luck timing for Mary and Joseph ends up being the very thing that fulfills a prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. We're talking about Micah 5:2.

Micah 5:2

*"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times."*

God could have just told Joseph to get up and go to Bethlehem. That might have seemed an easier method. But that wouldn't have shown us the same truth about God. Think about it this way. If I told you you were going to get a flower today, and then I handed

you one at the end of the service, you wouldn't be very impressed if I said, "See? My prophecy came true!" But if I told you you were going to get a flower, and then someone walked out the door and a bird happened to fly in with a flower in its mouth and it flew right over your chair and dropped the flower in your lap, then you might believe in prophecy. And if you then learned that I had been the one to actually orchestrate a bird's flight patterns and timing, you'd be astounded at my ability to control things.

That's exactly what we're saying about God. He has an awesome ability to bring world events under his authority. I'm not saying that bad decisions and directions are from God. But, nothing anyone says or does is outside the scope of God's ability to redeem it. I love the story in Genesis when Joseph gets the chance to confront his brothers who sold him into slavery. They had been so cruel to him and stole years of life with his family. It was pure evil when they told his dad that Joseph had been killed. Completely inexcusable on any level.

And yet, as horrific as that was, God turned it around and made it the very thing that saved millions of people from starvation. And Joseph commented to his brothers,

Genesis 50:20

Don't you see, you planned evil against me but God used those same plans for my good, as you see all around you right now -- life for many people.

You may be a victim right now of somebody's evil against you. Life may seem like a series of unfortunate events, and you may be wondering how God could possibly allow all the bad things to happen. And I don't have any answers as to why he lets evil exist. But I do know this: Evil cannot win. We are free to choose him or not, but God is on the throne of heaven and he has not let go of the reins, and one day everyone who has set themselves up against God is going to have to bend the knee to him. He has the ultimate word. And in the meantime, even as bad things happen, he can take what was intended for evil and use it for good. God's agenda trumps every other agenda., and he always accomplishes what he sets out to do, against the most impossible odds. God's purposes override everything.

The second thing that stuck out to me about this census was how it showed **God's arms reach everyone.**

I have an old copy of the New Testament I keep on my nightstand, and the other night I opened it to the passage in Luke we read earlier. It's an older translation, and it's good to sometimes read different versions, because the wording struck me in a different way.

Luke 2:1

Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth.

The more modern translation we looked at this morning changed "all the inhabited earth" to read "throughout the Empire," giving a little more clarification that is no doubt what

Luke meant. But the raw translation of the Greek would literally say “all the inhabited earth.”

Think about that: To bring about this fulfillment of prophecy that his Son would be born in Bethlehem, God went so far as to use an event that affected all the inhabited earth. For this one tiny detail, God reached out and touched everybody.

I think that’s beautiful. It’s like a proud father announcing to the world the arrival of his baby boy. He wants everyone to know. When Jesus appeared on the scene, it was good news for all people. Something big needed to accompany it. The world needed to be nudged out of its normal orbit. People needed to at least feel the reverberations. Like the ripples made when a rock is thrown in the water, Christ’s came and the world experienced an interruption in the routine.

There are two things I’m driving at here. **The first is that God will go to the ends of the earth to accomplish his will in your life.** There are no limits on his power or his commitment. God asks in Isaiah,

Isaiah 50:2

*Was my arm too short to ransom you?
Do I lack the strength to rescue you?*

He can reach you and he has no trouble doing the extravagant to make it happen. In his book, *The Prodigal God*, Timothy Keller talks about how prodigal means recklessly spendthrift, to spend until you have nothing left. We normally apply that word to the younger son in the parable Jesus told, but Keller says it also applies to God. He says,

Jesus is showing us the God of Great Expenditure, who is nothing if not prodigal toward us, his children. God’s reckless grace is our greatest hope.

The second thing to note is that when Jesus arrives on the scene, the effect is widespread. You may not even know Jesus at all this morning. But God has already begun a work in you, and the fact that you are here shows that you are feeling the ripples. Like he used the census to move people, he uses our life circumstances to nudge us out of our routine and draw us toward himself.

A third truth I think the census highlights for us is how **God’s ways reverse our logic.**

Rome had three basic uses for the census:

1. Determining economic strength. People had to register their property during the census so Caesar could know how much tax to impose on them. Counting people was really about counting money.

2. Determining military strength. Rome depended on the male population 17 years and older to draw from for its army. The census helped them know what kind of human resources they were dealing with.

3. Defining identity. For the upper classes particularly, the census was more than just an inventory of how many people were in your house. It was how your social standing was determined. They were asked a lot of personal questions about the health of their family, the state of their fortune and so on. Depending on their answers, they could be moved up or down the social ladder. You could even lose your citizenship. So your sense of who you were in the world depended in large part on your participation in the census.

Now the Jewish community also had a history of taking a census of the people. We first have a record of God giving instructions to Moses on how to take one clear back in Exodus. We'll look at that one in a few minutes. But the purpose seemed to be different for that counting. It wasn't a measurement of strength like it was for the Romans.

In fact, there was a time when David decided to take a census of his army for that reason, and he realized afterwards that he shouldn't have done it.

2 Samuel 24:10

David was conscience-stricken after he had counted the fighting men, and he said to the LORD, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done. Now, O LORD, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing."

David was acting like all the pagan kings around him, measuring his odds of success in war based on human capacity rather than depending on God.

This is what the Roman census was all about. It was the epitome of human self-sufficiency and pride. Look who we are. Look how much money we have, how many soldiers we have, how solid our people are. We're unstoppable. We can solve any problem, get through any crisis, because we have the resources.

It is right in the middle of this posturing that God sends his solution to the world's problem. It's a baby. A baby who has zero money to contribute to the coffers. A baby who can't fight in any army. A baby with no social standing.

Jesus represented the opposite of Rome's values – human helplessness, poverty and humility. It is as if God wanted to shine a light on how much of a contrast there is between his way of thinking and ours.

Because we're all like Rome. We all like keeping track of our best resources so we can know how to lean on our own strength to get through life. And God says, "You have to let that go. Your strength needs to come from me."

Psalm 147:10-11

The strength of a horse does not impress him;

*how puny in his sight is the strength of a man.
Rather, the LORD's delight is in those who honor him,
those who put their hope in his unfailing love.*

We will all reach a point where our strength and resources are useless to us. Someone will get sick or die or leave and all we rely on will not be able to help. Except God. We can scramble to pull our resources together and fear the next crisis, or we can believe him – that when God describes his love as unfailing, that's exactly what he means.

Where is your hope today? What are you counting on besides God? He invites us to come to him with all the helplessness of a baby and trust that he will care for us with his unfailing love.

There's one more aspect of "God in the details" that the census draws our attention to, and that is that **God's census saves us**. I had never before thought in terms of God doing his own counting, but he does. And he uses a much different method than the Romans.

I mentioned before that God had given some instructions to Moses about how to conduct a census. And tied directly to this concept of counting is the concept of God's redeeming work.

Exodus 30:11-16

Then the LORD said to Moses, "When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each one must pay the LORD a ransom for his life at the time he is counted. Then no plague will come on them when you number them. Each one who crosses over to those already counted is to give a half shekel, according to the sanctuary shekel, which weighs twenty gerahs. This half shekel is an offering to the LORD. All who cross over, those twenty years old or more, are to give an offering to the LORD. The rich are not to give more than a half shekel and the poor are not to give less when you make the offering to the LORD to atone for your lives. Receive the atonement money from the Israelites and use it for the service of the Tent of Meeting. It will be a memorial for the Israelites before the LORD, making atonement for your lives."

Counting people served as a reminder to everyone that each of them owed their very lives to God. And it was across the board. No social standing could save you here: Rich or poor, everyone was in the same boat. There had to be a ransom paid.

And this is where Jesus comes in, and God's counting does, too. Because he is the ransom, and he paid it by coming to earth to be counted like us.

Isaiah 53:12

*Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
because he poured out his life unto death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,*

and made intercession for the transgressors.

There is a powerful message in the fact that God chose to send his Son to earth during a time when he would literally be numbered with the rest of the population. It was God saying, "Yes. I will be right there with you in the thick of life. I will take on all the inconveniences and difficulties of humanity that a census represents. I will let myself be considered one of you. And then I will pay the ransom no one else can."

What a God we have! From God's perspective, Jesus being counted as a human – treated the same as a SINFUL human -- is the only census that matters in the end. He was numbered among the transgressors, which took him to the cross. And there the ransom was paid in full. Because of that, God stopped taking a census of what we're doing wrong:

2 Corinthians 5:19

For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. This is the wonderful message he has given us to tell others.

Our sins are no longer being counted. Praise God for the new math!

Jesus came at just the right time. It looked like it was all wrong. But God's purposes prevailed. His arms reached around the world. His ways shook everyone. And his way of counting brought salvation in the most unexpected way.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, we are remembering that at just the right time, Jesus came and died for us.

What are you counting on this morning? Maybe for you, Jesus has always been just a baby in a manger, and you've never gotten to know him as the person who was counted in your place, taking the punishment for your sin on the cross. Maybe you've been leaning on your own strength, trusting in yourself to make it in life. God says there is a different way. Your sins don't have to be counted anymore. All it takes is saying, "Jesus I need you. I believe you died and rose again for me. I want that to be what counts for me. Please forgive my sins and come into my life."

Maybe you've prayed that prayer, but like that census, circumstances in your life are making it difficult to believe he's in control. Take a moment to pray for his will to be done in your life. He can redeem the worst situations and bring good out of what is intended for evil.