

## **Counting in Bethlehem**

**Text: Isaiah 7: 10-17; Luke 2: 1-7**

**Rev. Dr. Geordie Campbell**

**December 1, 2013**

A visit to an art gallery . . . the truth of God's presence . . . and the wheat and grape of the Christ Child: these steps take us into Advent this morning.

**We start in the gallery.** Imagine standing together before a painting. The canvas in our field of vision is quite large ó just shy of four feet in height and a little more than five feet in width. It portrays an ordinary Flemish village on a cold winter day, a busy scene with lots of variety, as the townsfolk huddle to keep warm. A woodsman gathers up twigs and branches to sell as firewood. A few large barrels are delivered to what appears to be a restaurant. Children are playing, some skating and others throwing snowballs. And over to the left, completely off-center, is an inn with a large gaggle of people waiting to go in. The painting is called "The Census at Bethlehem" as artist Pieter Bruegel has imagined Mary and Joseph coming to be counted in his own hometown.

The scriptures tell us, "There went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all of the world should be enrolled." And what Caesar wants Caesar gets, which is why this oddly solitary couple have made their way ninety-some miles to be counted. It didn't have to be Bethlehem, after all, this strange mystery in the making. It could have just as easily been Antwerp, as for Bruegel, or West Hartford for any of us.

As we look closer, something catches our eye off to the right: down toward the bottom; barely perceptible; nearly invisible; moving slowly toward the census or the enrollment line; a woman who is great with child rides on a donkey led by a man carrying his tools of carpentry. It is Mary, soon to give birth, and Joseph the carpenter following the call of their day to be counted.

Scripture again: "And Joseph also went up from Nazareth, a city in Galilee, to Judea, the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child."

What is so stunning in this portrayal is how the artist was able to capture this mix of mundane and yet holy Advent truth - this intersection of liturgy and life. God comes into the scenes and moments of our everyday lives, most often in ways that we are scarce to recognize. Mary and Joseph and the incarnate mystery of Jesus in that village were almost certain to be lost in the ordinary and unimportant ó just as we ourselves can become lost to God's presence for our very selves.

**Bring that thought right here.** It's another December morning as the traffic thickens around our fair town. The aroma of coffee arises from the cup holder between the seats. As usual, running just a pinch late. Got a meeting in mind. The lists not even written down begin to filter and sort. The radio is on as NPR provides white noise. Later today is a lunch with someone to reconnect. Large thoughts. Smaller thoughts. Someone honks a horn because the day is not moving fast enough. The hesitation of another car reveals that someone is texting ó no matter all of the warnings.

But then, into the off-center almost hiddenness of it, the everyday ordinariness laid out so plain, something holy becomes clear. The light in the sky carries a sparkle of clear air. A golden retriever nuzzles and licks at the girl by her side. A mother hugs her toddling son, who is more interested in the dog's wagging tale. Someone takes an elder by the arm at the corner of Farmington and Main. The steeple glistens against the deep blue sky.

This how it most often is with God's presence or at the very least with our awareness of such. It's what advent asks us to tend. An old proverb comes to mind: "Entering the meadow, God moves not the grass. Entering the water, God makes not a ripple."<sup>ii</sup> And that's just exactly right! Which is precisely why advent calls us to awaken, commands us to attention, shakes us to open our eyes.

Henri Nouwen put it like this: "When I have no eyes for the small signs of God's presence or the smile of a baby, the carefree play of children, the words of encouragement and gestures of love offered by friends or when I look instead for spectacles and impressive events to convince me of God's nearness . . . I will always remain tempted to disappointment and despair."<sup>iii</sup>

Words from around the time that Pieter Bruegel painted his portrayal of such presence, another soul wrote this: "Thou shall know him when he comes/not by any din of drums/nor the vintage of his airs/nor by anything he wears/neither by his crown nor his gown/for his presence known shall be/by the holy harmony/that his coming makes in thee."<sup>iv</sup>

**Now . . . I have no idea how such thoughts meet in you this morning, if anywhere at all.** But I do know this. Advent is with us again with its prime time invitation of the spirit that I don't want any of us to miss. This is the season to awaken and prepare. It's the time to open our eyes, no less our hearts. And I can think of no better place to begin than at this table set before us; and no better time to begin than now.

My family and my friends; and my friends who have become my family in Christ, come now, the table waits. And remember, as you do: If it is true, as I have told you, that God enters the meadow and moves not the grass, and God enters the water but makes not a ripple . . . then it is also true that the One for whom we prepare and wait is already here. Amen.

© 2013 Charles Geordie Campbell.

---

<sup>i</sup> Wolfgang Stechow. Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Harry N. Abrams Publishers, 1970, pp.100-101.

<sup>ii</sup> Ted Loder. Tracks in the Straw: Tales Spun from the Manger. Luramedia, 1984, p. 169.

<sup>iii</sup> Henri Nouwen. Gracias: A Latin American Journal. Orbis Books, 1993, pp. 62.

<sup>iv</sup> Author unknown.

**First Church of Christ Congregational**  
United Church of Christ  
12 South Main Street, West Hartford, Connecticut 06107  
860.233.9605 [www.whfirstchurch.org](http://www.whfirstchurch.org)

---