

**Luke 2:1-5**

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

**Isaiah 7:10-16**

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. Then Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

**“The Census Taker; What Really Counts?”****Rev. Charles Schuster****November 27, 2011**

There is someone in your life who is like the census taker, who sits in a little room with a calculator or an abacus, humming. Or maybe there's a little bit of this in the back of your mind and the pit of your stomach. Perhaps it's a boss or maybe it's a bishop or could it be a spouse in your house or a kid who was born prematurely old. Might it be a colleague who's had too much to think and not enough to drink, who thinks intoxication's the only way. And you and I will hear them count, and you and I will be told the count is accurate and the numbers tell the tale of the tape. You must do it and it must be. One child born in Bethlehem, one mother, one dad, step forwards and smile at the camera, sign on the dotted line, you're a number. You are in the count, consider yourself enrolled. Next.

So many to count. None of them amount to much. It's just a number without a name. It's a taxpayer to be taxed. It's a roll that's taken down yonder while the bureaucrats try to guess what the bottom line will be. It's all about numbers. It's all about things to do. It's all about what is known for sure and confirmed by the count or the list of dos and don'ts and dates. You must act. Gotta get a gift because it says I do. Gotta be joyful because it's a joyful time. Gotta know it came upon a midnight clear. What child is this? There's nothing much to it. Christmas far-sighted think they see the near-sighted know there's nothing much. The far-sighted, again, will blindside the near-sighted, and the so-and-sos will tell us so. The census-taker's count is all that counts. The imperative, you must act. A tree selected and drug into the house, or the boxes found with the plastic limbs. And the thing is spread out on the floor with nuts and bolts and no instructions are provided, or if they are provided, it is not helpful, as part A is to be juxtaposed with stanchion B and tightened with wingnut C, lined up so that the threads are counter-clockwise. But the train runs backwards on the track and pole-vaults off the table, and the Christmas wreath falls

off the mantle into the gas logs and the carpet is singed, but you got the fire out, and the Christmas turkey should have had more oven time, but you could cut it with a fork, though it was a rosy tint. And the walking talking robot with batteries included, didn't. And your son wasn't too interested, since it didn't talk and wouldn't walk.

The far-sighted get blind-sided by the near-sighted, and the census taker takes a count and the so-and-sos who tell us so will speak, unless we understand the difference between a prediction and a prophecy. Unless we are prepared for Christmas before it comes. Unless there is some defense against the census-takers, and the numbers will find the time. Unless we rise above, we will be rushed and roughed on through it with no time to chew it, and we are apt to miss it, or wish we had. The census-taker tells us what we must do, and we will do it. Christmas is ruled by the imperative.

In the words of Marjorie Richmond, however, we enjoy the busyness of the season and all it has to offer, for it is leading to God's most important promise, to send us the Messiah. Thank you, Marjorie. The imperative, you must act. Declarative, it will be, the prophecy. Let us visit the story and find ourselves someone there. Joseph is the one who understands something about the season. Joseph was driven by the imperative. "It must be," the angel said. The prophet spoke. The angel said Mary will give birth. "It must be," the prophet said. The prediction, Quirinius was governor, there was a census. "You must come, no questions asked, it must be." The imperative, Joseph was driven. You know, there's always a voice somewhere, somehow, and it speaks and we hear it, always the so-and-so who tells us so, and always it is, we listen, the prediction.

Peter Strudwick is a marathon runner. We never heard of Peter Strudwick, because he never won a race, because there are people who have told him, the so-and-sos have told him "You will lose, always, you will lose. That's the way it is. Face it, Peter." The imperative prediction. The word comes down, and a church in the midwest debates the decision to join other churches in sponsoring a health clinic, the clinic treats families of migrant workers because public health resources cannot, and one of the members of the church who had been quite influential over the years had a very definite point of view about this and made his feelings known. "These people are illegal aliens," he said. "We're supporting illegal activity. Don't give me that line about how they are people. They ought to stay in their own country. They are not our problem. We can't be all things to all people. We cannot give church funds for such a project." The imperative, it must be.

How much of this time of year is scripted? How much of what comes down to us, people camping out Thanksgiving Day, waiting waiting waiting, got their little tents out there. It's not going to open until midnight, but they're there waiting on Thanksgiving Day when they could be home being thankful for what they have. They're lined up to buy more. The mad dash to the store, the lines are long, the traffic is heavy, the signs on the way "No right turn, stay in your lane, stop, stay, go shop, walk, run, take a number, wait your turn, do what you're told, go when you're invited." Obligations are clear and must be followed. Things to do. And we are told, the so-and-sos who tell us so, the near-sighted blind-siding the far-sighted. The imperative. We're driven.

The census-taker's Christmas - one, two, three, lets' see, count, move up, and on it goes, and then it takes a different turn. At first we are pushed and then we're pulled. We're drawn. The inevitable, predictable, it happens, and it was, it must be, and it was. The angel said it, Joseph took Mary for his wife, and there was a baby boy. Isaiah spoke of a young woman who would have a child, and she did, and his name was Immanuel, and his name was called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, and his name was called Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace, and he will rule people with justice. Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, and his name will be called Immanuel. Joseph was pulled, drawn. It came to be. Predictable, it is inevitable. Predictable.

And there are things like that in our day. It seems at times especially now, there is movement but no control. The debt crisis in Europe, the stock market drips and drops, the housing crisis down, unemployment up, census takers count. Economists, pessimistic, and it seems at times, especially now, there's little we can do to change the course of things that are out of our control. It's inevitable.

Peter Strudwick is a marathon runner, and they told him he would never win a race, and he was drawn to that fact, it was inevitable and it came to be, it was. Peter Strudwick not only never won a race, he never finished a marathon race any better than dead last. It was inevitable. It came to be, it was. And that church in the midwest debated the need for supporting the health clinic for migrant workers. The church leader spoke, his speech was compelling, it was inevitable, it came to be, it was. The church in the midwest debated the need for the health clinic in the church to support it. The motion was withdrawn. What's the use? The church will not, the church did not, the motion was withdrawn. It was predictable, the result. It's predictable this season we will do what we've been told, and now it has begun, and in four weeks we will light our little candles and sing our songs, but who is able to abide the day of his coming? O come o come Immanuel, indeed, seven verses, we can't sing all seven verses.

Marjorie Richmond said it, enjoy the busy-ness of the season, and we sing our songs, and we hear the story again. It is predictable, the season, it is inevitable. We are on a course, we're being drawn toward a goal. The goal is in sight and we know what's going to happen, because it always does. It is predictable. It's always the same. But one thing we've got to remember about Christmas is, it is primarily about the birth of Jesus. That is such a simple statement that it needs to be repeated, so that the power of the words can get through to us. One thing we must remember about Christmas, it is centrally and singularly about the birth of Jesus. To the census taker, it was just take a number, to the nearsighted who blindsides the farsighted, the so-and-so who tells us so, it was a prediction. And some have thought Jesus was a predictable result.

But what we must remember is the difference between a prophecy and a prediction. A prediction, when it works, is predictable. A prophecy, when it happens, is fulfilled. A prophecy fulfilled is theological, not predictable. God speaks. Surprises happen. Fulfillment is the result. A prophecy fulfilled is always more than what was expected. The prophet's imperative prediction, a child will be born, the prophets predictable fact, the birth resulted, as it was said, it must be, so it was. But the prophecy was fulfilled. God

said there would be Jesus. Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. He was not government upon his shoulders, no, I don't think, no no. Humble, not majestic. Government not on his shoulders. Mighty, no. Humble, yes. Marjorie wrote, "God has sent us the Messiah. God has sent us the Messiah.

Madeleine L'Engle said it best, she said, "Christmas is about God. Cribbed, cabined, confined, within the contours of a human infant, it is the infinite defined by the finite." Jesus is remembered for things like saying "Blessed are those who mourn, blessed are those who suffer for what is right, blessed are the peacemakers." Jesus is remembered for the way he died, not so much the way he lived. He is remembered for what others became because of him, more than what he was in and of himself. Jesus is not the predictable result of a long-ago prediction, Jesus is the fulfillment of a prophecy. Jesus is not what they expected him to be, he was more than they expected, though some were disappointed. The prophets were, the child was born, and God said, "Guess what?" Christmas is to suggest the so-and-sos who told us so are wrong. Imperatives, inevitabilities, guess what? The near-sighted should not blindside the far-sighted, because there is too much to see, if we look, with our hearts. God said, "Guess what?" And that means discovery.

Peter Strudwick has been in many marathons, and has finished last in all of them. Peter Strudwick is a last-place finisher, but guess what? Peter Strudwick is no loser. See, his mother had German measles before he was born. He was born without arms or legs. He is called the footless runner. He runs on stumps at the ends of his legs. Peter runs to help people know that a disability need not be disabling. Peter Strudwick is a winner - guess what? And the church in the midwest, the one that decided not to help the clinic work with migrant people, the pastor of the church invited the man who spoke, whose speech killed the project, to lunch. The pastor asked the man to go with him to the clinic, and the two of them were in the waiting room, seated, when a nurse appeared at the door and called out the name Miguel. And a little boy of four marched bravely toward the nurse, rubbing his arm where he would soon receive an inoculation. And in a short time, Miguel re-appeared, now rubbing his arm vigorously and fighting the tears that were pushing from his eyes. And Miguel looked for his mother, she had taken another child to the restroom, she was not there, so Miguel, finding what looked like a kindly face, walked over to the church leader, crawled onto his lap, rested his head against the man's chest and guess what? First hesitatingly, then willingly and lovingly, the man wrapped his arms around Miguel, and when he did he was surprised by his own spontaneous compassion. Guess what? Two weeks later, there was a meeting, and there was a motion, and the church should sponsor the clinic. Guess who made the motion? Guess who had tears in his eyes when the motion passed?

The Christmas season is not about predictions and predictable events, it's about fulfillment and surprises and discoveries. Tom Hegg has written a poem about fulfillment and discovery in Christmas. It's called "A Cup of Christmas Tea." It's about the yearly Christmas race and how it's busy, and bizarre, and it's about cards in the mail and gifts in the stores, it's about orneriness and ornaments, it's about a letter he got from his great-aunt. It read, "Of course I'll understand completely if you can't, but if you can find some time, how wonderful it could be if we could have a little chat and a cup of Christmas tea."

Tom's aunt had had a mild stroke, and for a variety of reasons, he didn't want to go to see an old relative, to see how far she'd gone down hill. "I remembered her as vigorous and funny and bright. I remembered Christmas eve when she regaled us half the night. I didn't want to risk it all, I didn't want the pain. I didn't want to be depressed, I didn't need the stress." Tom goes to see her and guess what? Christmas is fulfilled. "There beside her rocking chair the center of it all, my great-aunt stood and said how nice it was that I'd come to call. I sat there, rattled on about the weather and the flu, and she listened patiently and smiled and said, 'What's new?' Thoughts and words began to flow, I started making sense. I lost the phony busy-ness I use when I am tense. She was passionately interested in everything I did. She was positive, encouraging, like it was when I was a kid. Simple generalities still sent her in a fit. She demanded specifics, particulars and bits. We talked about the limitations she had had to face. She spoke about her candor with humor and good grace. Then defying the realities of crutch and straightened knee, on winged hospitality she flew to brew the tea. I sat alone with feelings I hadn't felt in years, I looked around that Christmas through the thick hot blur of tears. And the candles and the holly she'd arranged on every shelf, and the impossibly good cookies she still somehow baked herself. But these rich tactile memories became quite pale and thin, when measured by the Christmas my great-aunt kept within. Her body halved and nearly spent, but my great-aunt was whole. I saw a Christmas miracle, the triumph of a soul."

That's what we want to see when Christmas is fulfilled, I hope we'll see the triumph of the soul. God who sent us the Messiah, the baby of Christmas, the adult he became, the drivenness of Christmas, the discovery that we make the theology of the season, the God who wakes us up and helps save us from the season and from ourselves. It's the triumph of the soul, discovering what Christmas is about. Discovering the power in our soul. Discovering the value of our friends. Discovering the depth of meaning in our faith. Discovering the highest and our best and somewhere the so-and-sos who think they know are wrong, and the near-sighted cannot blindsides the far-sighted, because Christmas has made us insightful by the word made flesh. Somewhere there is a census taker in Bethlehem, in your family, in your circle of friends, or in yourself. Somewhere there is a census-taker who wants to issue imperatives and declaratives. It's predictable, you must be, you must act, it's predictable. And it was. Somewhere a census taker like the one in Bethlehem saying, "Oh yes, over there in the inn, I hear it happened in the stable, a child was born to a peasant couple. I suppose I have to count him, but you know, that will never amount to much." And God said, "Guess what?"