

Christmas 2019

He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. Luke 2:5-6

They went to be counted, Joseph and Mary, in Bethlehem of Judea. Registration in one's familial home was a political device, exercised not because Palestinian Jews mattered much to the Roman government, but because it helped keep them in their place. In the midst of this counting of people who, by and large, did not count for much, the divine love of God came to life in the infant Jesus to make precisely the opposite claim.

In a livestock shed, presumably away from the crowd and the scandalized eyes of judgmental relatives, the young, unwed Mary was delivered of the baby she had carried in her womb from Nazareth in Galilee. We can imagine that she may have been attended to by one or two women who were experienced in childbirth, caring souls who knew that she and her baby counted, if not to Caesar Augustus, at least to them and to Joseph. And like shepherds, magi, disciples, saints, and sinners through the ages, we have come to understand that this child counted to God; indeed, he was the very incarnation of God's love.

God's love in the flesh. Of all the ways that divine love is made manifest in creation, God chose to manifest it most fully in the extreme vulnerability of childbirth, not in a palace or the maternity ward of a 20th century hospital, but in a humble barn, two millennia ago. When the government was counting in order to intimidate and control, God by divine action declared, "This is who counts to me. This fragile, infant human, who is no different from the least of you."

The message of the Incarnation is that you count. Whoever you are, you count. There are no exceptions. You count so much to God that you are entrusted with God's own love. And that divine love is incarnated - it takes on flesh, our flesh - every time we act on behalf of the other. Because, of course, the other is always Jesus.

With every blessing of the incarnate love of God,

The Rt. Rev. Mark Hollingsworth, Jr.
Bishop of Ohio

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Behind the crowded house and busy streets
Where gathered "all the world" for Caesar's lists,
His tiny breaths mixing with those of beasts,
His swaddled legs and feet and arms and fists
Comforted by the cloths holding him close,
Newborn, and least of those who'd traveled far,
Lay One who would in time be counted most,
Illuminated only by a star.
A feed trough lined with hay served as his bed
Where shepherds made their journey of respect
And distant travelers would leave gifts and shed
Stark light on what from Herod to expect.

'Neath angels' adoration from above,
There lay the incarnation of God's love.

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