



CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

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## TO BE COUNTED

*the Rev. Dr. Paula Northwood*  
*Lead Minister*

*December 24, 2020, Christmas Eve*

**Text: Luke 2:1–7**

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### **5 p.m. Service Meditation**

I have read or heard the Christmas story my whole life and never paid much attention the words: “Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken. . . . and everyone went to their own town to be counted.”

*To be counted.* No other year have these words meant so much. I don’t know if the children here this evening realize that you were counted this year in our country’s 2020 Census. Your parents may have filled out a form or someone may have come to your door. But you were counted!

And I imagine that you have heard from your parents about how important it was this year to have their votes counted for the presidential election. And there is even another way that we counted people this year, like no other! We counted how many people were infected by the coronavirus. We counted how many ICU beds we have. We counted how many respirators the hospitals had. We counted how many masks. And, sadly, we counted how many people have died from the virus. We have done a lot of counting!

I met with some of you children on Zoom this week, and you showed me in the chat feature how you could count! Learning how to literally count is important. When I was young, my parents taught me to pray before I fell asleep. I prayed for my parents and all my brothers and sisters. I grew weary of saying their names, so I gave them each a number. I prayed, “God bless 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9. Amen.” I knew that God knew who I was talking about!

Knowing how to count is important, but being counted is even more important. It makes us feel significant, like we matter . . . like we count.

I wonder if any of you have ever said these words: “Watch me.” “Mom! Dad! Watch me! Watch me run, jump, skip, fall down, play the piano!” I know I used to do that. Why? Because I wanted them to pay attention to me. I wanted to feel important. I wanted to count. I’ll let you in on a little secret. Big people do this, too!

Now I don’t know why Caesar Augustus wanted to count people in Jesus’ day, but our government counts people so we can know not just how many people there are in our country but so that Government resources can go to places such as schools, hospitals, and community centers. The Census also determines each state’s number of seats in the House of Representatives and votes in the Electoral College. There are a lot of important things that the Census can tell us.

At one point our President said, “Stop counting!” during the Census because he didn’t want some people to get services. During the election, he said, “Stop counting!” because he was losing. During this pandemic, the President wanted us to stop testing people because it was making the number of people who were sick

seem too high. But it doesn't work that way. Just because we choose not to count someone doesn't mean that they aren't important. God wants everyone to count!

The Gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus was born during a census. God came to earth during a season of counting. God came to earth to share the good news that everyone counts in God's family.

Children count, women count, men count, refugees and immigrants count, the homeless count, queer people count, people of color count, trans people count, the least of these count, because for all of us, our counting creates the kind of family Jesus wants us to have.

Tonight, we celebrate Emmanuel, God born in a baby, to demonstrate that that even the tiniest, most vulnerable count. You count. I count. Everyone counts in God's eyes. God sees you. You are loved and cherished by God no matter what. You count!

My prayer is that you have a Merry Christmas during this season of counting! Amen.

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### **8 p.m. Service Meditation**

Before this year, I never paid much attention to the line in the Nativity Story that reads: "A decree went out that a census should be taken. . . . that everyone should be counted." *That everyone should be counted.* Of course, biblical scholars disagree about the timing of this census and whether one needed to go back to one's homeland to be counted, but we do know that the Roman Empire carried out a census every five years almost solely for the purposes of taxes. But these three words—*to be counted*—have never taken on more importance than this year!

One of our most basic needs is to feel valued, important and that we matter at various times. We want to count! When I started talking about retiring my father-in-law told me one of the challenges of retirement was going from one who is contributing to society to feeling insignificant. I have thought a great deal about that his comment. What does it mean for us to matter, to feel significant, to think we really count?

If you have ever spent much time around children, you know they like to be seen. "Watch me! Watch me!" "Mom, did you see me? Did you see me?" "Dad, watch me run, jump, trip, and fall!" Children want to be seen, to be counted. And one of the first things we teach children is their numbers, so that they can literally count. When I was young, my parents taught me to pray before I fell asleep. I prayed for my parents and all of my brothers and sisters. I grew weary of saying their names, so I gave them each a number. I prayed, "God bless 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9. Amen." I thought if God knows everything, God knew who I was talking about!

This year, we were counted in a variety of ways. This was the year of the 2020 Census in the United States. The result of this count is not just a population tally, but the results factor into how we allocate political power. By being counted, you are influencing how we allocate congressional seats, draw voting districts, and distribute federal funds, as well as many other governmental issues. The more people that are counted in an area, the more political influence that area can exert.

This was the year of the 2020 election. The freedom to vote is America's most important political right outside of the Bill of Rights, and it is also the most hard-won right. In the early years of our republic, only white landowners could vote. Slowly, the franchise was expanded in the states to incorporate all white males. Then, women gained full or partial suffrage in most states before 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920, which federalized full and equal voting rights for women. The hardest voting rights struggle was for Black Americans, whose right to vote was recognized in the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, but who continued to face official and unofficial restrictions and suppression in many states and cities until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 established strong federal protections for the freedom to

vote by banning or limiting many of the discriminatory election policies and practices of Jim Crow laws. Unfortunately, and unforgivably, this year we saw numerous voter suppression attempts.

This was the year of the 2020 pandemic. We still count how many people have been infected by the coronavirus. We count how many people are being tested. We count how many ICU beds we have. We count how many respirators hospitals have. We count how many masks we have. And, sadly, we count daily how many people have died from the virus. Thankfully, we are now counting the numbers of vaccines. This has been the year of counting!

I don't know who was included when Caesar Augustus wanted to count people in Jesus' day. For certain, free men were counted, but there is a great deal of discrepancy about whether women or slaves were included. Women and slaves may have been counted, but they did not have rights.

We have watched this year as our President has said, "Stop counting!" during the census because he didn't want some people to be included. During the election, he said "Stop counting!" because he didn't want votes for his opponent to be included. During this pandemic, the president wanted us to stop testing people because the infection rate kept going higher and higher. But not counting people does not mean they don't exist. Every time I hear the President inflating or deflating numbers, I am reminded that we can put our own counting toward various ends.

In the world that God is creating, everyone matters, everyone counts! There is a lesser-known story from the book of Numbers where it indicates that a census was taken. But women were excluded and, in particular, the five daughters of Zelophehad. These sisters filed one of the earliest lawsuits on record. Their father had died, and, because only men were counted, they did not count. They did not inherit his land and were forced to live on the margins of society. But they won the lawsuit, they inherited the land, and they were counted.<sup>1</sup>

The Gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus was born during a census. God came to earth not only in the manger. God came to earth during a season of counting.

For women, for children, for the dispossessed, for immigrants, for the precariously housed, for queer people, for people of color, for the least of these and for all of us, our counting advances the kind of community Jesus always seeks and works to create.

Tonight, we celebrate Emmanuel, God embodied in humanity, to demonstrate that that we all count, not just the rich and powerful, but even the tiny, vulnerable baby of a destitute family. As people of faith, we believe that all people, regardless of race, religion, or immigration status, have inherent dignity because all people are created in God's image.

Our inherent dignity demands recognition. We long for the freedom of all people and for chains of oppression to break. For far too long, too many of God's children have been excluded and counted as less than human, which has resulted in inequality and injustice. But we know that all people count as equal in God's eyes.

God asks us to love our neighbor as ourselves. When we count ourselves, we are helping make sure not only our needs are met, but also that our neighbors have good schools, hospitals, roads, critical resources, and fair political representation.

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<sup>1</sup>Heidi Neumark, "The 2020 Census and the daughters of Zelophehad," *The Christian Century*, September 9, 2020, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/reflection/2020-census-and-daughters-zelophehad> (accessed January 8, 2021).

God assures us to “Fear not,” for God walks with us in our lives, and we trust in God’s spirit and guidance. Especially on this night, we count ourselves as your children. We count! We are children who have the power to bring peace where there is chaos, justice where there is inequality and hatred, and hope where there is despair.

O Come, O come Emmanuel! May it be so. Amen.