
All the World Should be Registered

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A Sermon at The Cathedral of St. Philip
Atlanta, Georgia
Christmas Eve 2009

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ..All went to their own towns to be registered. (Luke 2:1-3)

Where are you registered tonight?

Wherever you are on this Christmas evening, here in a glorious church of joy and wonder, or at home, warm and cozy, ready for rest and bed, wherever you are on this Christmas evening, my question is this: Where are you registered?

A "register," as you know, records things. It records data and names people. And registers are everywhere in the world. At weddings and funerals, guests sign registers. In shopping malls and boutiques, cash registers have been busy, registering the transaction. You have been registered. Your computer software, whether you know it or not, keeps a registry of you.

If, sadly, we are stopped on the highway, by our friendly officer of the law, the officer wants to see both our license and our vehicle registration. If we want to participate in this country's democratic republic, we register to vote.

The world wants us to register. Every year, I hear of someone who wants to flee the world, to get away from registration and twenty-four hour surveillance systems. I loved the movie, *Enemy of the State*, for that reason; one of the main characters was truly living off the grid. Right now, there seems to be a famous golfer trying to flee the world; maybe he's looking for his true identity.

This past year, *Wired* magazine sponsored a contest, in which one of its writers, Evan Ratliff, would disappear from the world of digital registration and surveillance. He offered five thousand dollars to anyone who could find him between August 15 and September 15; and they could use any means possible. Investigators used all manner of digital searches, GPS systems, and forums. He conjured up all sorts of fake accounts and numbers to mislead them. But, do you know what? They found him. Somebody won five thousand dollars.

We are registered people in our day and time. The world finds us and names us. The world has registered us.

And yet, in each of us, there is also something that does not want to be registered. We don't want to be known simply as a social security number, or an impersonal category. The world says we are "White Caucasian," or "African American," or "Hispanic" or "Asian."

Our hearts ask us, "Aren't we something more than those designations?" Aren't we something more than "Income under fifty thousand dollars a year," or "Income over one hundred thousand a year"? Aren't we something more than "straight or

gay," "married or single"? Something in our heart wants to be more than a demographic designation, something more than all these registrations, these worldly measurements of identity!

But our plight is to succumb; over and over again, we submit to the registration. We check the box. We refer back to our hometown and call ourselves "from Atlanta," or "from New York."

Often we think that, this time, if we give our official information, then the designation will help us. If I sign this form, I will be helped. I will get the rebate. My neighborhood will receive more government subsidy. I will receive better health care. If I register my wedding at this store, I will receive gifts that I can actually use. If I type in my credit card number here, I will get that new computer for Christmas.

All of us do register. It is the way of the world. The decree has gone out. All the world should be registered. And we have complied, over and over again. When all is said and done, we do want to be known. We do want to be identified, with something or another, and we register everywhere.

Two thousand years ago, Mary and Joseph returned to their hometown, to be registered, because that was where they were known. Many of you have returned to your hometown this Christmas - or at least to where your parents or children are""because that is where you are known. You have come back to your family, even if your family lives this year in another house, or another town. You telephone them; you email them. Somehow, our families and hometowns give us an identity; they place us on the registered grid of the world.

Two thousand years ago, however, there was a birth that occurred off the grid. With no room in the official establishments of the time, Mary and Joseph had their child in a manger, in a stable, where no one was really sure what the census was.

This young child was a puzzle, for he could not be categorized at all. He could not be designated. He could not be registered. People noticed him, of course, but they could not completely name him. He was a Savior, for sure, a Messiah. Angels sang to him. Shepherds and common folk flocked to him. But he was a child. How could a mere child be the fulfillment of so much human expectation? How could a mere child be the answer to so much human need?

Later in his life, this man, Jesus of Nazareth, would be designated by so many other names: king, prophet, healer, rabbi, teacher, even "Son of God." He would name himself with other images: living water, bread of life, true vine, the door, the way and the truth. With each image, this Jesus registered himself with us; he named himself for us; he imprinted himself on our souls.

After his death, and after his resurrection, we have tried to register this Jesus with still more images. We have categorized him as social activist, good friend, healer. We have tried to register him as fully human, but also as fully divine. Generation after generation, we have tried to contain Jesus with our names and numbers, with our categories and registrations.

Because, for us, registration is the way of the world. Science needs measurement. Biology needs taxonomy. Government needs registration. Society needs names.

But we fall short. We fall short when we try to register ourselves; and we have it backwards when we try to register just who this Jesus is. We can never fully measure ourselves, and we can never fully measure Jesus.

It is not our role to register Jesus. Rather, it is our role to be registered by Jesus, to be registered ourselves by this birth that we observe tonight. We let ourselves be named and ruled and governed by so much these days. We let ourselves be registered by so many companies and promises and fantasies. But the birth of Jesus occurred so that God could register us!

Yes, Mary and Joseph were on their way to be registered; but they would be registered by someone far greater than the Emperor Augustus. It is God, and only God, who can fully measure us. The mystery of Christmas is that God measures us. God identifies us! God registers us!

The early Christian theologian, Saint Augustine, famously said, "Our hearts are restless. Our hearts are restless, until they find their rest in thee." Who was he speaking to? Was he speaking to his mother, welcoming him back home again? Was he

speaking to his lover, resting his heart and his head, upon her lovely presence?

No, Augustine was praying to God. "Our hearts are restless," he said, "until they find their rest in thee, O God." That is our prayer tonight, on this one night of the year, when we are as close to home as we will ever be. Some of us travelled far today. Some of us will travel far tomorrow. But tonight, Christmas Eve, we are as close to home as we can be.

Because, tonight, God has found us. God has located us with a registry system that goes far beyond any of the computers or GPS systems or iPhone apps that are for sale during this season.

God located us. God registered us, once and for all time, by being born in the flesh, in Jesus Christ our Lord. That birth means that God is born again and again - wherever human flesh longs for love and pursues peace in the world. In those places which yearn for justice and mercy, God seeks to enlist us; in all those places, God registers us.

A decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. Little did the emperor know, however, when he sent out that decree, what was about to happen. Yes, all the world would be registered, but not in the way, he, or anyone, anticipated.

The world was registered that night in Jesus Christ our Lord. The world was found and redeemed that night, in Jesus Christ, our Lord. The world was touched and sanctified that night, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

So tonight, we rejoice in that event. We rejoice because we know it is still true. We have been registered, recorded, by the only One whose registration truly counts: the creator and redeemer and lover of the world. In your restless search for identity tonight, in your restless search for love, let God touch you. Let God touch you with peace and justice, mercy and love, grace and excellence. And the Word will become flesh, once again, registered, in your heart.

AMEN.

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