

Born Under a Bad Sign
Titus 2:11-15 and Luke 2:1-20
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Preached December 24, 2011 at San José, Costa Rica

Jesus was born under a bad sign. You see, when Mary and Joseph were arriving in Bethlehem, the heavens were aligned in such a stellar fashion that it made him a Pisces with Sagittarius rising, and that, as anyone can tell you, is never the way to start a successful Messiahhood, or should that be Messiahship. Oh wait, wrong sign. What I really meant about the bad sign was the big, neon no-vacancy sign on the Bethlehem Hilton. There is no worse omen than arriving being all dressed up with no place to stay. And if that weren't bad enough, no one left the light on for them. Oh wait, wrong sign again. No, really and truly, Jesus was born under a bad sign, a bad sign of the times, and that sign was the census, that counting of people that sent them scurrying to the places of their birth, that census that meant that sky-high taxes were going up again, that census that reminded everyone of just which class each person belonged, slave or free, Roman or Jew, landowner or tenant farmer, have or have not, powerful or powerless. Yes, that census was a bad sign for Jesus' people, a sign of hopelessness and despair, yet another far away Roman ruler exerting his authority on their already authoritarian existence. And Jesus was born right in the middle of it. People often wonder why God chose that moment to send Jesus into the world. Why not a dozen other perilous moments in the life of that people, why not on a day already on the

calendar, a day predicted, a day invested with meaning, an annual festival, the anniversary of a famous victory in battle? Why *then*, God? Well, maybe the answer lies in that very census itself when all the distinctions human beings could possibly make between themselves had a spotlight shining upon them, and into that awful darkness God shone a great light, a light from heaven, a beacon of hope. And as if to highlight how foolish we are, God sent Jesus into the world as the very antithesis of he who had ordered that census in the first place, so that the light of the world would be counted too, among his own people, he, and they, in all their weakness, vulnerability, and lack of status and wealth. Take that, O Emperor of Rome! Count this one too, count this baby, because he really matters. More than you will ever know.

That's the heart of Christmas, isn't it? That we all matter. That we all count. That we all have value, no matter what others may think of us, or even what we think of ourselves. We have value because in the very beginning we were created in the image of the very greatest value, and though we may not be the thing itself, we bear its imprint, its mark, its image and likeness. We are a little lower than the angels, yes it's true, but we are crowned with glory and honor, and God doesn't do that for just any old creatures, but for those with value, a value we easily forget, but that God doesn't. And how do we remember that we count for something? How do we remember that we have any worth at all? It is, I think, by celebrating that babe in the manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and remembering that

Jesus did not come just for a quick visit, a look-see on the creation he was responsible for. He didn't come as someone who looked like a human being but really wasn't; he wasn't wearing a disguise to fool people. He didn't come as one impervious to pain, or cold, or fear. No, he came in the flesh, and for the long haul, and open to the experience, and in a moment in history when his birth really did mean something, and if that, the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, doesn't tell you that you mean something, you'll probably never believe it.

But even if you do believe it, please don't be misled into thinking Jesus came just for you, just so that *you* would know *you* mattered, but so that everyone might know it, that we all might return praise for the great gift of life, and the affirmation of that life in Jesus Christ. Some people already knew they mattered. The ones who commanded the census knew. They knew they were at the top of the heap, and they thought they knew why. They thought they were God. Literally. The Emperor thought he was God, or at least expected everyone else to act that way, to act like he mattered, that he counted, and that it was his right to confer value on his subjects, according to his whims. They had no inherent value as human beings created in the image of God. They had value only insofar as he said so, and how he said so. The people at the bottom of the heap really didn't matter. They only counted to be counted, and were only valued to add value, only lived to give their worthless lives for the ones who really mattered. Those of you who know what it is like to be treated without a shred of respect, without a thought for

your feelings, you know that when you get treated that way long enough, you start to believe it. You start to believe that you really don't account for much, that you are stupid, or lazy, or dirty, or worthless, or whatever other criticism is heaped upon you. And when you believe that about yourself, it doesn't take much for you to believe that about others, and to act on that belief in that never-ending spiral of emotional and spiritual paralysis, self-destructive behavior, and violence toward others. Now that's a really bad sign, when a whole class of people believe that about themselves, and others. But that's the sign under which Jesus was born. There might as well have been a sign over the stable in which he was born that said, "We don't matter--and we don't care." Jesus didn't come from the one percent, from those who already knew they mattered, and that is what made his birth such good news. You see, if the incarnation of God brings value to human life, how much more does it bring to those into whose very midst he came, from whose womb he came? He is like me. He is one of us. We matter. We all matter.

I read two passages of Scripture tonight, that familiar story from Luke, but also some words from Paul's letter to Titus, words which are also appointed for every Christmas Eve. I think the choice of these words from Titus for every Christmas Eve is a stroke of brilliance, because they drag that Luke story that we have so successfully romanticized out of the realm of fairy tale and into our lives this very night. It is not that the census and the manger and the angels and the shepherds are a fiction, far from it. It is what we have done with that story over the

years that makes it easy for us to leave it there in the first century, sweet and sentimental and powerless, a perfect greeting card, but not much else. But Paul tells Titus what it really all means, what we are supposed to do with it. Hear these words again: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. Declare these things; exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one look down on you.”

The grace of God has appeared in Jesus Christ of Nazareth. We are saved. We are called to live like we know we are saved. We are supposed to let people know about that grace. We are to be “zealous for good deeds” (I love that phrase!). And through it all, perhaps above it all, we are to remember that we matter, that we count, that we are valuable in God’s eyes, you, and me, and everyone. “Let no one look down on you.” You are a child of God, just as much as that child in the manger. You’re not God; don’t ever forget that! But also never forget that you matter, and that the person sitting right next to you matters, and the person sitting next to them matters, and the person sitting on the curb in downtown San José with a bottle in her hand cursing her luck and maybe cursing you too for not giving her even a hundred colones, she matters, and the person on the south side of the

demilitarized zone between the Koreas peering across at the guy on the north, the one he calls his enemy even on Christmas Eve, they both matter, and Donald Trump, he matters, not because he might still run for President of the United States, but because he too matters in God's eyes, whether he knows it or not.

Maybe you've come here tonight wondering if you matter, if your life has any relevance, if it means anything to anyone. Maybe you feel like you are living under a bad sign. Maybe it's because you've been treated like those who were living under a bad sign in Jesus' time, disrespected, disregarded, despised, and over time, that's become the way you think of yourself too. Maybe you're having a hard time living with something you've done, something which maybe you think is unforgivable, some word you've spoken, or deed you've done, that has robbed you of your worth. If that's the way you feel tonight, if that's the condition of your soul tonight, let me quote a very wise and fortunate angel who once offered these words, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." That angel's words are meant for your ears: You do matter.

And if you've come here tonight feeling pretty good about yourself, praise God for that, for you, because that's just where God wants you to be. But perhaps some of you have come here tonight feeling pretty worthy, but having forgotten that everyone else is worthy too. Maybe the words "those people" creep into your mind from time to time, as in "those people aren't worth my time" or "those people

will never change.” Maybe you’ve come here tonight a little discouraged that someone you know isn’t living up to your expectations. Maybe you’re even a little bitter that your family, or your neighbors, or your church isn’t acting the way you’d like them to act. Maybe, just maybe, you look around at the world, at the wars and the famines and the abuses and the oil spills, you look around and you wonder if God is really worthy of all the praise we offer tonight, because the world is still such a mess so many years after the birth of this so-called Savior. Well, if that’s the way you feel tonight, if that’s the condition of your soul tonight, let me quote a very wise and fortunate apostle who once offered these words, “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” That apostle’s words are meant for your ears: “Everyone matters, go and act like it.” You see when we believe we matter, and when we live like we believe everyone matters, then truly there is “Glory to God in the highest heaven and peace on earth and goodwill to men.”

Friends, as we light our candles tonight, let me invite you to light yours remembering you matter, and as you pass your flame, that everyone matters, and that even though Jesus was born under a bad sign, we are born under the sign of good news, Emmanuel, God with us, and God for us. And that makes all the difference. Amen.