

The Numbers Do Lie

Luke 2

A sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's, Austin on Christmas Eve 2021

I used to be good at math, believe it or not. I used to tell people it was my favorite subject. Until I took Calculus. I found Calculus to be so punishingly boring, the purpose so opaque, and, candidly, Ms. Simmons to be so all around terrifying, that that class single-handedly ruined my love for math and ended up being the last math class I ever took in my life. I didn't think I could hate math any more, and then Covid math entered our life.

You know what I'm talking about. What is a positivity rate? What does R-naught mean? Omicron is how much more transmissible than Delta which was how much more transmissible than "Covid classic? "How do hospitalization rates between the vaccinated and unvaccinated differ when you take age into account? How many minutes in what kind of setting with which variant counts as meaningful exposure and then how long do I have to wait to get tested and how many days must I then isolate in my bedroom while my mom slides bagel bites under my door? I'm so sick of doing Covid math. I'm sure you are too.

I used to like math for what I presume to be the reason that most people do—the clear and unambiguous black and white of it all. It adds up or it doesn't. It's true or it's false. It's clean. Living in a world that can often feel overwhelmingly complex and confusing, numbers can provide us a sense of security, even comfort. A single math problem is a universe unto itself and it's one that at least makes sense.

Which I think explains what has motivated me—and I suspect many of us—to keep up with all the Covid math more than I ever managed to with Calculus. How many of you have the Austin Public Health tracker bookmarked on your web browser? It's not exactly comforting, but it does give one a semblance of security. The numbers provide guardrails to our ever-evolving reality. They help us assess risk. Numbers give us building blocks for making meaning out of the world. They give us at least some small sense of control in a society that appears to be rapidly spinning out of it.

All this Covid math made me read the Christmas story a little differently this year. Notice the first line in Luke's telling: *In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all should be registered.* The Christmas story begins with the most powerful person in the ancient world doing what? Asking for numbers. Asserting and defining the contours of his control. You can almost imagine Augustus lying in bed at night, knowing he is the most powerful person in the world, but wondering to himself, "Just how powerful am I? I'd like some data. Precisely how many thousands or millions owe loyalty to me? How much tax must I charge per capita to have enough to build my beautiful Coliseum? With a snap of his fingers, he can put the entire ancient population on horseback—or donkey-back—to their respective hometowns. The Emperor has all the numbers, all the internet dashboards he could ever want or imagine. That is power. That is control.

But, of course, the Emperor is not in control. All the numbers in the world might make it look like he is, but the Christmas story is proof that those who do the counting aren't always the ones who move history. While the

page one headline of the day was without a doubt the sudden and mass migration mandated by the Emperor, there was something else that happened late in the night that would change the world forever, something that would reverberate throughout history so loudly that millions of people across the globe would gather once a year for thousands of years on end to celebrate and remember the baby who was born in Bethlehem. To bear witness to what on that first Christmas no one was there to see but two newly married, tired, temporarily homeless Palestinian Jews and a few assorted livestock. We gather to remember that sometimes God is changing everything in places where nobody is looking.

Numbers never tell the whole story. That's the first thing the Christmas story is about. Numbers can be helpful, don't get me wrong. Especially when facing an unprecedented public health crisis. We should be thankful for scientists and other experts who are working hard behind the scenes to do the difficult math so we can make good, well-informed decisions in a confusing world. But it is still the case that numbers don't tell the whole story. And numbers can almost never tell the parts of the story that matter most. They can never get to the heart of things.

I'm reminded of New York Times front page from May 24, 2020, when we surpassed 100,000 American deaths from Covid, the editors decided for the first time in over 40 years to print a front page without a single image or graphic; instead they printed names, ages, hometowns, of the people who died, occasionally including 5-7 word obituaries. A small way of saying, these deaths are not just data points; they are people who were known and loved.

The numbers don't tell the whole story of your life. You are not your age. You are not your salary or how much money you have in the bank. You are not your weight. You are not what you do for a living. You are not your last name. You are not who you are on social media. You are not your failures. You are not your addictions or your regrets.

You are what Mary saw looking back at her from the manger—an infinitely complex, inexhaustibly mysterious, uniquely beautiful human being. This is a second thing that the Christmas story is about. Humanity is where God chose to make his presence fully and finally known in the world. It didn't have to be that way. God could have stayed in heaven. God could have come as an un-killable superhero. But this is what happened. This is the heart of the matter that no number can quantify: God becomes human. In flesh and blood, God makes himself vulnerable to us. God makes himself fragile, a baby able to be held to one's chest, able to be wrapped in bands of cloth, able to grow and learn, read, write and run, able to be misunderstood, to be hated, and to be killed.

God in Christ inhabits the same fragility that you feel deep inside your bones. God inhabits the same existential dread, the same anxious mind, the same mortal and broken body—God takes on flesh, your flesh, your feeling, your fear, and because he is not only human but also God, Christ in his body—through his incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection—creates a space and a path for all humanity to flourish and to live forever. This is how we are saved. This is the shape of salvation. God sends Godself to us, to our very core, to our deepest heart, and brings us back to himself, to dwell where there is no death, where pain and suffering are no more, where glory is transformed into glory for ever and ever. Jesus is God stretching out his hand towards us and offering us rescue.

Caesar wanted to be in control. And so do we. In the wild moment of history we are currently living in, who can really blame us. But this tendency is not new with Covid. We do it all the time in our normal lives. And the truth is, we have very little control over what happens to us. If the last couple years haven't taught us that, I'm afraid we haven't really been paying attention. We can read the numbers and choose not to be stupid, absolutely. But beyond that, we can't comprehensively protect ourselves or those we love. Even if we successfully protect ourselves from Covid—which I believe is definitely worth trying—none of us can ultimately be protected from death. Numbers can be helpful. But they can also be the shields we use to deflect away inevitable and difficult truths. We're not in control of our own lives.

The conventional way to end this sermon would be to remind you that even though we aren't in control, God is in control. And so everybody just calm down. And while that is true that God is in control in an ultimate sense, it is not what Christmas is all about. God promises that things will turn out right in the very end, but God makes no promises that things won't be extremely difficult in the meantime. The miracle of Christmas is not that God is in ultimate control, the miracle of Christmas is that God in Christ enters into our circumstance of not-being-in-control, and experiences it with us from the inside out. And suffers the accidents and rioting viruses of history alongside us. And from that place, from that vulnerability, that ultimate vulnerability even unto death, brings us with him into eternal victory.

So Merry Christmas.

Amen.