
Christmas and the Soul List of God

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Christmas Eve – Year C

“In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also ... went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.” Luke 2:1–5

Do you have your list with you? I've got mine. I have even signed it!

Surely you have had various Christmas lists. Do you have yours in your pocket still? Have you filled in all the blanks yet?

Most of us have other lists, too. We have grocery lists, shopping lists, recipe lists for the holiday meals, thank-you note lists. So many lists! Apparently, even Santa Claus keeps lists. Next week, we will make out the most difficult list of all – our list of New Year's Resolutions!

Most everybody makes lists. Check lists. Top Ten lists. Genealogies. When earnest people make a New Year's Resolution to read the entire New Testament, from beginning to end, they start at the Gospel of Matthew, and are baffled to read only that Abraham begot Isaac, Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot Judah and his brothers. Judah begot Perez and Zerah by Tamar, Perez begot Hezron, and Hezron begot Ram, and so on and so on. According to Matthew, the beginning of the New Testament is a list. Someone has said. “Thus begin the begats.” The world is full of lists, no matter where we live or what century it is.

“All the world should be listed.” So declared the decree from the Emperor Augustus, about to impose another tax upon his empire. He demanded that his people register, take a census, make a list. Yes, of course governments like to make lists, because it helps them keep control. So, today, we have taxpayer lists, and we have property records. We register our cars. We register our births. We register our deaths.

And it's not just governments. We all make lists, whether we like government or not. Every day I make a “To Do” list, a list of the things I hope to achieve today. Alas, I rarely get to the end of that list, but somehow the list comforts me. It makes me think my day has been organized. It makes me feel like I have control.

Do any of you remember the writer, Umberto Eco? He is perhaps most famous for his book, “The Name of the Rose,” written years ago; but he continues to write as a philosopher in Italy, and a true wonder. He cheerfully admits that he likes lists. A few years ago, it was his task to catalogue a special exhibition at the Louvre, in Paris. Someone interviewed him (*Spiegel* magazine in November 2009) about why cataloguing was important. Why making a list was important.

Umberto Eco replied that, “the list is the origin of culture. It's part of the history of art and literature. What does culture want? To make infinity comprehensible. It ... wants to create order... How does one face infinity? How does one attempt to grasp the incomprehensible? Through lists, through catalogs, through collections in museums and through encyclopedias and dictionaries.

Umberto Eco went on to say that, “The list doesn't destroy culture; it creates it. It's a way of escaping thoughts about

death. We like lists because we don't want to die.”

Umberto Eco is right! Something in us likes lists; they keep us alive. One of our favorite songs is a list, so catchy that John Coltrane and McCoy Tyner made a jazz version of it:

*Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens
Bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens
...Wild geese that fly with the moon on their wings
These are a few of my favorite things*

Keeping things alive, creating order, making infinity comprehensible, our culture likes to make lists especially at the end of the year. We see titles like, “the top heroes of the past year,” “the top ten movies of 2015,” “the top twenty vacation spots for 2016,” “ten ways to lose weight in the upcoming year.”

Connecting us to the culture around us, lists give us the feeling that we are in control.

But, there are two kinds of lists. Some lists are required of us, ways that our culture or the empire wants to take something from us. These are demanding and obligating lists. Such was the list of the emperor Augustus Caesar, who required a census, that everyone be registered with the empire. And there is always an empire, no matter what century we are in. Whether you have seen the latest Star Wars movie or not, that movie does remind you that one thing never changes: there is always an empire!

Empires want control over us, and they make lists which take things from us. When we absorb lists of “top ten vacation spots, top ten ways to lose weight, top ten investment opportunities,” we are letting ourselves be controlled by what they describe. We can turn most anything into an idolatrous empire.

But there is a second kind of list: not lists which take things from us, but lists of things we want to give. Christmas lists are the supreme example. The Christmas list consists of what we want to give, people to whom we want to give.

There is nothing better than this second kind of list, a list not of obligations, but a list of thanksgivings. The best list is for what we want to give.

We remember the Christmas story tonight because we want to join the soul of Christmas. We want to join the heroes of Christmas, those who know how to *give*. The heroes are the shepherds who *give* glory to God. The three kings *give*, because they want to honor a new kind of king, not a ruler over an empire or kingdom, but a Lord who teaches the world to give, and not to take.

And Mary, dear Mother Mary, *gives*. Mary is just like any other woman who gives birth. She gives away some of herself. She gives away some of her soul.

And God *gives*, too. A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away – in fact, in an eternity long ago – God made a list. God made a list when he decided to give. Knowing that he would be giving away something of himself when he created life, God made a list.

That list is us! That list is all of God’s creation. God gives himself to that creation list, creation which is earth and air and water, birds and animals and fish, trees and flowers and grasses, all God’s favorite things, “wild geese that fly with the moon on their wings,” and finally a list of us – humanity: blacks and whites and browns and eastern and western – the whole catalogue of humanity. The entire taxonomy of flora and fauna in the world is God’s holy list.

God’s list is us.

God signs his great list with the person of Jesus: Jesus, the signature of God.

We honor Jesus because Jesus is the sign that God has given truly of himself. Yes, God’s autograph is Jesus of Nazareth, flesh and blood, the title and signature of God’s great soul list.

All the world *is* registered tonight, but not registered with the Emperor Augustus. All the world is registered with the Holy.

We are on God's giving list tonight. God has given soul to us. In the same way, our giving lists show us where our soul is: Christmas lists. Prayer lists. Thank-you note lists. Lists of things for which we are grateful.

Giving lists show us where our soul is. Make a list this year of those you love. That is your soul list. Make a list of what you are giving thanks for. That is your soul list. Make a list of what you want to give away. That is your soul list. Your soul list is for giving.

The lists which truly give us life, which give us soul, are the lists of things that we intend to give.

Christmas is for giving. Christmas is for giving our souls. When we give, we gain freedom. When we give, we gain infinity! When we give, we make infinity comprehensible, and the Word becomes flesh, and dwells among us, full of grace and truth.

Amen.

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