

Meditation on *Census at Bethlehem*, by Bruegel the Elder, 1566



Luke 2:1-5 *In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.*

The Painting:

The artist, Bruegel the Elder, was reimagining the scene from Luke 2. He set the events in Belgium in 1566, the time and place where he lived.

Take a slow look at the painting. What all do you see?

Perhaps you notice all the busyness—a crowded village scene filled with peasants going about their daily activities. But who are these people in the painting failing to see in their midst?

The central figures in the painting are Mary and Joseph, but they are hard to find. Do you see them? If not, look for the woman on the donkey in the lower center of the painting. The painting depicts Mary and Joseph approaching the inn where they had traveled to be registered for the census. No one seems to notice them.

Mary is dressed in blue, the color often associated with her in art. Joseph is leading the donkey and an ox. Historically, the ox represented the Jewish people, and the donkey represented the Gentiles, or non-Jewish people. It's a reminder that Jesus came for all people.

What else do you see? A leper's hut (just to the right and behind the donkey), marked with a tiny cross on its roof and surrounded by cross-marked graves, reminds us of the hard life for people afflicted with a disease like leprosy. Yet Christ is here in their very midst, hidden and unseen.

Notice the many circles in the painting, including the round wreath at the door of the inn, the wagon wheels. Do you see other circles? The artist used them as symbols of eternity. Bruegel wanted us to remember the eternal significance of seeing and knowing Jesus, who is always with us.

In the lower left corner, we see three chickens pecking at their food in the snow. Perhaps Bruegel is reminding us of Peter's denial of Jesus before his crucifixion, and the cock crowing three times? Huge logs to the left of the chickens remind us of Jesus' own future occupation as a carpenter, with the beams resembling the cross on which he would be hung.

God often seems hidden from us. But he promises that he is close to us and at the very heart of our lives. We can pray and ask God to help us see his presence all around us. One practice that can help us see God more clearly is paying closer attention for small, seemingly insignificant signs of his presence. Bruegel's painting is an invitation for us to open our eyes and see the Christ who is Immanuel—God with us.

To Consider:

1. What grabs your attention, or do you find most interesting in this painting?
2. Imagine yourself in this scene. Where would you be and what would you be doing? What activities might distract or preoccupy you, making it hard for you to notice the presence of Jesus in your life?
3. Just as these people are often blind to Jesus's invisible presence in the midst of their busy lives, we are often blind to it as well. Do you have any ideas of how to look more closely for signs of God around you?

Directions for this experience:

1. Print off a copy for each person participating in this experience.
2. Here is a [link](#) to this painting. Seeing it on a larger screen might help you see the details more clearly. Also, a magnifying glass is helpful and fun to use!
3. Find a good spot to spend a few moments enjoying this painting together.
4. Consider the questions on the previous page by either journaling about them or discussing them with someone else.
5. Close with a short prayer.