

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
Sunday, August 30 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Readings: Matthew 18:12-14
2 Samuel 24:1-4,8-9 and 1 Chronicles 21:1-5, 7-8**

Sermon: Count your Blessings

What do **you** say when something bad happens?

Take the covid-19 pandemic, for example:

From a **scientific perspective**, for example, Science Daily reported a study saying that the novel coronavirus, covid 19, is the product of natural evolution, most likely due to infection between an animal and a human. Their analysis of public genome sequence data from SARS-CoV-2 and related viruses found no evidence that the virus was made in a laboratory or otherwise engineered.

From a **political perspective**, however, the pandemic has been widely used by politicians to discredit their political opponents - Zhao Lijian, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman, has repeatedly promoted the idea - without offering any evidence - that Covid-19 might have originated in the US, tweeting that it might have been the US army that brought the virus to Wuhan.

At the same time, some US government spokespeople have raised the notion that the virus was created in China and released intentionally to cause a global pandemic, you know, so they could take over the world.

From a **theological perspective**, a recent poll organized by the University of Chicago Divinity School found that 31% of Americans who believe in God feel strongly that the virus is a sign from God telling humanity to change.

One popular American preacher said “God sometimes uses disease to bring particular judgments upon those who reject him and give themselves over to sin,”

Naturally, these last two, the theological and political examples, are extreme. All of them, however, demonstrate how someone’s bias or self-interest can influence their explanation of why bad things happen.

Today, in our scripture story, we have a great example of how that bias works in the Bible. These are two passages, talking about the same historical event, but from two different perspectives, with very different motivations. My hat is off to Anne Clement, who caught the contradiction in the two books, I don’t think I’ve ever read these stories before.

The historical event is a census of the men of Israel, during the time of King David, which was then followed by a terrible plague, where at least 70,000 people died. In both

accounts it says that the plague was God's punishment of David for taking the census in the first place.

Anne wanted to know why it was wrong for David to take a census – and why it is that one story makes it sound like it was Satan who caused David to sin, and why the other story blames the king and the people of Israel.

The book of Samuel is found in the part of the Torah dedicated to the prophets. These writings were compiled during the time of the exile. From a prophetic point of view, the writers were not afraid to criticize the monarchy. They openly blamed the kings for the fall of Judah. BUT they also believed that all humans were redeemable, if they listened to God and put God's priorities first. When something bad happened, they would say it was caused by human sin.

The books of Chronicles, however, were written after the people returned to Judah, during a time when they wanted to rebuild the nation, which included bolstering up the monarchy. The authors of the Chronicles took a particularly positive view of King David, who in their opinion could do no wrong.

So the writers said that when bad things happened, the problem of evil was "out there" – it must have been Satan, or the tempter, setting David up. God then caused the plague so that David would listen only to God, and reject Satan.

In both stories, when God saw what David was up to, God sent the plague to show the king the consequences of his actions. Both accounts agree that counting the men of Israel was wrong.

We hold science and statistics in high esteem in 2020, so it is hard for us to understand why David's census was considered a sin.

In ancient times, a census was very disruptive to families and communities. It disrupted trade, it displaced people who relied on their farms and daily employment for their livelihood. It broke connections between religious communities and generations of families.

Just think of the Christmas story, with Joseph dragging a very pregnant Mary away from her home, all the way to Bethlehem, just because "in those days, Emperor Augustus" required that all should be registered. (Luke 2)

The people of Israel had fought war after war, in order to establish their nation against the Arameans and the Ammonites and the Philistines. They fought huge armies, even giants, in order to establish Israel in the promised land.

But the people knew, and God knew, that taking a census usually led to 2 things: 1) the king was doing this accounting in order to increase their taxes, and 2) that increase in taxes almost always meant more war. More military spending, more men leaving home, more sorrow for the people, BUT more glory for the king.

Only God could call a census, according to Israel's law. In Exodus 30, every man had the right to take an account of their household – whether that be family, slaves, livestock, tools, land, etc. When King David asked for every household to be reported to him, he was sending the message “This is ALL mine. I can call it in any time I want.”

But God said to the king “No. These are my children, this is my creation, they are my beloved. Hands off.”

Whether you believe that for David “the devil made him do it!” or it was just a need to test the limits of his power, doesn't really matter. What matters is God saying “These are MY children, my creation, my beloved.”

The people of God were not there to make the king look good or strong or powerful. The people were there to live out God's promise of a kingdom of heaven on earth.

And it didn't matter whether the numbers were great, or if there was just a small faithful remnant, to God, it was the depth of their faith that mattered. Not the numbers.

When you think about it, an obsession with numbers can make us look good or bad, depending on the interpretation.

We can twist numbers, we can compare statistics, we can track bank balances and attendance numbers. But if that makes us more fearful or fatalistic, if it causes us to overlook the great faith that is right under our noses – then we are no better than David with his unnecessary census.

If we are putting God's mission at risk in order to fill our own coffers then eventually the consequences of our choices will catch up with us.

According to tradition, David was not only a king, but also the poet who wrote the 23rd Psalm. David was the one who inspired the parables and teachings about GOOD shepherds counting every sheep.

The good shepherd in Jesus' parables, however, doing that head count was not to brag about their wealth, but to figure out who was missing.

Who is missing from our story? Which voices are missing from the fullness of God at work in our midst? Maybe we dismissed them or discounted them. Maybe we made them unwelcome as full partners in the fold.

God is always searching for those who are having a hard time – for those who cannot find their way to the abundant life that is God's intention for all of us. We should count our blessings not according to how good they make us look, but how well we use them in our ministry to all God's children.

When our story is written, will we have the courage to write a story about our own humanity, the mistakes we made, and what we learned from them? Will we write about how we were challenged with a near disaster, and yet we survived because we

depended on God and helped our neighbours. How the doors were finally opened again, not just to some, but to all.

God has blessed us with this opportunity to account for the goodness of our lives and begin anew! May we always count our blessings and give thanks. Amen