

Here  
Luke 2:1-20  
Christmas Day, (Dec. 25) 2022  
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Years ago, in another city and another church, I found myself listening to a passionate discussion about how to help people that Christmas. Alverta, tall and gray, a veteran Christian, suggested that the church needed to reemphasize the custom of adopting needy families, buying clothes, food, perhaps toys for the children, and taking the things to them before Christmas.

A.B. spoke up. A.B. was also a veteran Christian, and an activist with the poor and the homeless. He said that food-basket charity is degrading and ineffective – it is simply a way for affluent folks to assuage their guilt with a once-a-year trip across the tracks to do a little something for one poor family.

Alverta snapped, “Well, A.B., what do you suggest we do this Christmas for poor people?”

He said, “We need more far-reaching efforts to address the systemic causes of poverty. We need structural change. We must deal with the systemic sources and the economic policies of this country.”

She said, “A.B., that is wonderful. Meanwhile, we need to help some families this Christmas. Some folk need something, now. Here. This Christmas.”

What do you think? It is true we need to address the economic structures of our society. And it is also true that many of the ways that we have customarily worked with people in poverty is degrading. It is true that food baskets are ineffective in breaking the cycle of poverty, but it is also true that people need help right here, now.

Will Willimon, at Duke Divinity School told me that he overheard a student ask a professor to give a Saturday to work on a Habitat for Humanity house. The professor replied, “I don’t work for Habitat for Humanity because I don’t believe it solves the problem of homelessness to build just one house at a time. If you really care about homelessness, you ought to work for a new senator in Washington.”

In other words, work toward more universal, society-wide concern for the less fortunate. We have been well taught – the greatest good for the greatest number, and so on.

Big. General. Universal.

All of that is good except the Bible does not buy into all of those presuppositions. The Bible, as usual, thinks differently than we do. Look at the Christmas story according to Luke. It is anything but big, general, or universal. Instead, it talks about the small, the specific, the local, the particular. This story is not about the whole human race; it talks about real live people with names like Quirinius, Joseph, Mary. None of this, “Once upon a time, in a land far away, there was a king.” That is the way fairy tales begin, not Bible stories. Bible stories begin with,

*In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus. ... This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled.... Joseph went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem.*

Specific, particular, concrete. Not “once upon a time,” timeless and eternal. This story can be dated – when Quirinius was governor of Syria. You can take a road map and follow Mary and Joseph’s journey from Galilee to Nazareth to Bethlehem.

This whole Christian faith is like this, dealing with the concrete particulars of the lives we live. I had a conversation with a fellow some years ago, a very bright and well-educated man, who was going to church once again. I asked him what made him return to church, what was it that attracted him to God. He said, “I like the doctrinal and moral framework and the principles

I am provided. Every Sunday I am able to jot down four or five principles that can help anyone live a good life.”

Doctrinal and moral framework, principles that can help anyone. No messy details about Quirinius’ enrollment. No Mary pregnant and going into labor. No Joseph. No detours through dusty, conflict-ridden backwater Bethlehem. No, bypass the concrete and go straight to general principles.

One of the interesting things that classical liberal theology and Fundamentalist theology have in common is that they both like principles, doctrinal truths, foundational universals. They both dislike the specific and the particular. For example, German higher-criticism and theology in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did everything possible to ignore the Jewishness of Jesus. “Of course, he was a Jew, but that is unimportant to who he was. He was the Christ of history,” they would say. Looking back, we can now see how their denial of the Jewishness of Jesus was a product of and a contribution to their anti-Semitism. Likewise, most Fundamentalist churches will talk about the inerrancy of the Bible but still put most of their emphasis on their “Five Fundamentals of the Faith” (that is why they are called “fundamentalists”), and preach a lot about such things as the “five principles for healthy living,” or “three principles for Godly parenting” or “three principles of Biblical stewardship,” and so on.

All of us want to drink our faith as clear liquid, with all the particulars of history, geography, and culture distilled away. We love general principles, universal, timeless truth relevant to anyone, anytime, anyplace. So, we come to Christmas talking about universal human love and the need to recover the innate compassion in all our hearts. Meanwhile, Scripture deals with the journey of a young man and his teen-aged fiancée who is very pregnant trying to find a room to spend the night in a country town called Bethlehem.

If we are to love as God loves, based on what Luke tells us, then somehow, we must love with a concrete particularity that is both comforting and challenging.

The Bible has no patience with our modern distinctions of particular/general, local/universal. Biblical faith collapses these false abstractions. We may address big issues, but we usually start with the local and the particular. For instance, I know a church, in Georgia, that is very much involved in prison reform, in opposing the death penalty, and so on. They did not start off, “Let’s pick a big issue to tackle.” No, what happened is that several years ago the Tuesday morning women’s prayer and mission group – what was called in old-time Southern Baptist life as the Women’s Missionary Union or the W.M.U.– began by praying for a woman’s grandson who was in the county jail. Then they went and visited him and began visiting with other families who were at the jail visiting their relatives. As they got to know the families and began to visit with the other inmates, the women felt that the inmates needed some care packages. So, they fixed up little bags of toothbrushes, toothpaste, hairbrushes, cookies, and a note from the women along with a pamphlet on how to become a Christian. Over time, these women, and by now they were bringing along their husbands to help, started doing Sunday morning Bible studies and worship services in the jail. They also began to notice that some of the prisoners were often bruised and cut. They learned about violence in the jail – violence between inmates and violence of the guards beating the inmates. Those blue-haired women went to the jailers who told them that was none of their business, which was not the right thing to say. Before you knew it, they had done their research started raising all kinds of ruckus with the local and county government and with the state legislature. Today, that whole church is a force to be reckoned with in Georgia over prison reform. They do not fit into the standard liberal and conservative camps. They are a church that started out and have continued to be anchored by their ministry with prisoners in their local jail.

In the early 1990’s we didn’t start out to be LGBTQ welcoming and affirming. We started out loving men who were sick with HIV/AIDS. Most were gay, and then, over time, in conversation and discernment with the Bible, with each other, including the men who were gay, and in deep prayer, we worked from there.

The Bible does not say, “Here are the seven principles of God’s love.” It says God loves Israel, God chose Mary, God spoke to Joseph, angels appeared to shepherds tending sheep in the pasture. God – in the Bible – goes to specific people, at particular times, in concrete places. God does not speak about philosophical truths or doctrinal frameworks; God becomes incarnate. Now I do not know what all of this means but I do think that it means that specific particular people living in specific particular places like Bethlehem or Nacogdoches matter to God.

Part of what that means is that God says for us to love our enemies it means not only people far off and distant; it also means that we are to love our enemies who live next door to us, sit two rows away from us, work in the same office with us, and so on. We are to care for poor people – not just in general – but in particular here in Nacogdoches. God engages us here. Jesus came to be with us here.

I don’t know why the innocent suffer. Why do good people die in accidents? Why do children, with their whole life in front of them, die? I don’t know. The Bible does not give us much to go on when we ask these kinds of big questions. What the Bible does tell us is that God cares about, not just about the suffering of humanity, but about the suffering of children and young people right here in Nacogdoches. That Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, is God with us right in the middle of our hurt and grief and worry. God calls us by name, knows the number of hairs on our heads, and loves us so much as to walk with us through pain and sickness. God cares about the specifics of our lives.

My old preaching professor, Fred Craddock, used to tell this story: It came to pass, there was a certain minister who preached to his little flock of “the world today,” “modern humanity,” and “the history of the race.” A layman complained of not being addressed by the sermons, but his complaints were turned aside with admonitions against small-mindedness and provincialism.

In the course of time, the minister and the layman attended together a church convention in a distant city. When the minister showed some anxiety about losing their way in the large and busy metropolis, the layman assured him there was no reason to fear. With that word, he produced from the rear seat of the car a globe of the world.

This story about Jewish Mary of Nazareth, Galilee, having a baby named Jesus in a stable in Bethlehem tells us that this just may be the way God loves us and comes to us and intends for us to love and be with others. You see, there is the chance that if God showed up in Bethlehem; God could even show up, **here**.

I know that some folk visit Austin Heights and have a difficult time with our particularity. Our life together, our worship, is very particular and specific. We look around and know most everyone – perhaps more than we want. One cannot slip in the back and be an anonymous member of a faceless crowd. **Here**, we pray for forgiveness three seats behind someone whom we need to forgive. We sing about the love of God and someone from across the aisle comes to mind who needs God’s love through us or perhaps they remind us what God’s love is all about. We pray about racism and we end up sharing the body and blood of Jesus with sisters and brothers of Zion Hill and Iron Wheel.

When God came among us, in the flesh, Emmanuel, God didn’t hover over the whole world. God came to Bethlehem. God did not appear as an idea or a program. God came to Mary and Joseph. When God decided to challenge the violent power of Caesar’s legions, God did not come as some new social strategy. God came as a baby named Jesus.

That is God’s way doing things, the first Christmas or this Christmas. So, pay attention. Pay attention to names, look at each other’s faces, listen to what someone says and how they say it. For this is how God comes among us, one by one. **Here**.

Sometime ago, I had the privilege of being on the program for a conference at Duke

Divinity School. Toward the end of the conference there was a question-and-answer time with those of us from the program sitting on a panel. A fellow stood up who had irritated me the whole conference. He made sure we all knew that he was the senior minister of one of the most prestigious and largest U.M.C. churches on the East Coast. His mannerisms grated on me; his manners and speech patterns all communicated over-the-top sophistication. So, he stood up, supposedly to ask a question, but really to make statement. He said, “I am distressed that no one has addressed the issues related to radical obedience to God’s program of justice and righteousness for the whole world.”

Before I could jump up and put my foot in my mouth, Rev. Susan Allred spoke up. At the time, Susan was probably in her mid-fifties. After raising a family and being an active layperson in church, she went to Divinity School in her forties to prepare for the ministry. She was the pastor of a small United Methodist Church in Chapel Hill, very much like Austin Heights. Susan was a calm and gentle pastor, perhaps even maternal pastor. She was very good. Susan said, “I have an elderly couple in my congregation who practice “radical obedience” to Jesus. He is an emeritus professor of philosophy at UNC Chapel Hill. A brilliant, learned, and respected man who now has Alzheimer’s. Every day she gets out of bed very early to care for her husband. Each morning she prays for God to help her make it one more day. Every Sunday when we have Holy Communion, they walk forward. She helps him take tentative steps and they come to bread and cup. She takes the bread and dips it in the cup and eats it as he watches her. She then takes his hand in hers and guides it to the bread and helps him break off a piece and then guides his hand to dip it into the cup. She gently guides his hand and places the bread into his mouth and says, ‘the body and blood of Jesus for you.’”

Emmanuel. God with us. **Here.**

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all.  
Amen.