

“Here”

John 1:1-5, 10-14; Luke 2:1-20

The Second Sunday of Christmas (Jan. 5), 2025

Kyle Childress

*Year after year the ancient tale of what happened is told—raw, preposterous,
holy—and year after year the world in some measure stops to listen.*

Frederick Buechner

“Emmanuel”

A Room Called Remember

Years ago, in another city, I found myself listening to a fiery discussion about what to do that Christmas. Alverta, tall, gray, and elegant, a veteran Christian, suggested that the church needed to reemphasize the custom of adopting a needy family, buying clothes, food, perhaps toys for the children, and taking the things to them before Christmas.

A.B. spoke up. A.B. also a veteran Christian was 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? Now, I believe that we do need to address the economic structures of our society. And it is also true that many of the traditional ways that we have customarily worked with poor people is degrading. Food baskets are ineffective in breaking the cycle of poverty.

Back in the early 1990’s, we found our small congregation faced with men with HIV/AIDS and no support. So, we started helping one or two men at a time – buying groceries, taking them to the doctor, finding a place for them to live. Then we organized some more, Barbara Cordell wrote grants, and we helped form the East Texas AIDS Project – now, some thirty years later known as the Brown Family Health Clinic.

In those early days, many of these gay men started coming to church. I had a veteran church member corner me on more than one occasion saying, “I’m okay for better policies in Washington that will help men with AIDS, but I’m against homosexuality.” I asked him, “Have you gotten to know Carl and Bill?” And he said, “Oh, yes. I love Carl and Bill but I’m against homosexuality.”

He was against the big, abstract issue of homosexuality but he was learning to love a gay couple named Carl and Bill, who were here. Who sat near him in

worship. Who were in church every Sunday, volunteering on workdays, bringing food for potlucks, and serving in any capacity asked, simply because they were a couple who were Christian. Over time, the particular, the in-the-flesh Carl and Bill, changed his views on the abstract issue.

The Bible has little patience with the big, the general, the universal, and the abstract. The Bible, as usual, thinks differently than we do. Look at the Christmas story according to Luke. It is anything but big, general, universal, or abstract. 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 (Luke 2:1-4).

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 Nazareth to Galilee (the road is still there) 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 had returned and was active in another church.

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 military checkpoints. No detours through dusty, conflict-ridden backwater Bethlehem. No, bypass the particular and go straight to general principles.

One of the interesting things that old-fashioned 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,” they would say, “What’s important is the universal truth. He is the Christ of history.” 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. When the Jewishness of Jesus does not matter, it makes it easier to kill Jews.

Likewise, most Fundamentalist churches put their emphasis on their “Five Fundamentals of the Faith” (that is why they are called “fundamentalists”) each of which are abstracted from the biblical stories.

Furthermore, much preaching and teaching in many churches tend to give you lots of “Five principles for healthy living,” or “three principles for Godly parenting” or “three principles of Biblical stewardship.”

We White American Protestants of the Left and of the Right tend to like abstraction. We want to drink our faith as clear liquid, with all of the particulars of history, geography, and culture having been 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 of our hearts. Instead, in the Bible we’re dealing 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.

If we are to be faithful to Jesus as disciples, principles abstracted from a generalized faith will not do. Generalized and abstract faith that leaves the particular flesh and blood Jesus out makes it easy to fill faith with whatever we want. We can say we’re Christian but still fill our lives with power and violence, guns and hatred and fear.

The Bible has no patience with our modern distinctions of particular/general, local/universal. Biblical faith collapses these false abstractions. We need to address big issues but we need start with the local and the particular. For instance, I know a church, in Georgia, that has been very much involved in prison reform, and in opposing the death penalty. 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 is called in old-time Southern Baptist life as 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. The blue-haired women went to the jailers who told the women 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 don’t do principles and they’re not really into “issues.” They care about prisoners in jail and their involvement in public policy stems from that flesh and blood, incarnate care. They are a church that started out and have continued to be anchored and rooted by their ministry with prisoners in their local jail.

The Bible does not say, “Here are the seven principles of God’s love.” It says God chose Mary, God spoke to Joseph, God loves Jesus. God – in the Bible – goes to specific people, at particular times, in concrete places. The Bible does not care for abstractions; but tells us stories about particular people in particular places,

where you can feel the dirt under your feet, smell the hay in the manger; hear the baby crying among the bleating of the lambs, the munching of the cows, and the stomach growling of the shepherds. 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, and work in the same office with us. 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. A friend since we were both eighteen, became an upstanding lawyer, a good man in every sense of the word, who married another dear friend of mine and they had three great kids. He gets a very rare form of cancer, fights it with every fiber of his body and soul for five years, and then, when it looks like he's turning the corner for the good, he gets sick and dies. Why?! Why the hell why?!

The Bible does not give us much to go on when we ask these hard and 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 suffering. 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 and death. God cares about the specifics of our lives.

My old preaching professor, Fred Craddock, tells 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 ideas.” 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.

When God came among us, in the flesh, Emmanuel, God didn't hover over the whole world. God came to Bethlehem. The Eternal Word became flesh and lived right in the middle of our lives. 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.

Immigration and climate refugees are at the top of the list of the big crises in our world. Nationalists want to build walls, concentration camps, and deport everyone who does not look like White Americans. At the same time, with drug cartels, making their billions from drug-buying Americans, climate change changing agriculture around the world, while much of the climate change is fueled by industrial nations like us, and U.S. policies which support dictatorships who in turn support U.S. based corporations, we are largely responsible for much of the causes for refugees and immigration. The need for changed policies in Washington and Austin are overwhelming. There is an urgent need for advocacy, but our advocacy must be rooted with real live people, right here where we live.

So, we pay attention to specific families and people needing a safe place to stay. Maybe people like Jose and Maria, with a baby named Jesu, who cannot find room in the inn, perhaps can find room with us. Here. That's why we're starting Casa Peregrina/Pilgrim House.

This 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. Take time to linger, be with one another, for this is how God comes among us, one by one. Here.

Years 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 churches in the state. His mannerisms grated on me; his manners and speech patterns were so

polished and sophisticated that I would get irritated hearing him. When he stood up, supposedly to ask a question, he really stood to make his point. 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 reply with something defensive, Rev. Susan Allred spoke up. Susan was about 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 Aldersgate United Methodist Church in Chapel Hill, a small active church very much like Austin Heights. Susan was very calm and gentle, perhaps maternal pastor. I do remember that 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 receive the bread and cup. She takes the bread and dips it in the cup and eats 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.’”

The Word made flesh. 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.