

Christmas Eve, 2020

LFLC

In a sermon entitled “When God gets Down to Earth,”
Edmund Steimle makes an interesting point when he says
that God is more realistic about Christmas than we are.

Just think about it: At Christmas time,
our behaviour becomes quite bizarre.
Trees suddenly spring up in the middle
of living rooms, lobbies and town squares;
buildings are decorated with designs made of coloured lights;
credit cards almost melt with overuse;

and in a culture which proclaims that happiness is found
in being young, rich and skinny,
we elevate to a position of honour
an overweight, out-of-shape old man
as an icon of merriment and generosity.

Talk about unrealistic.

Now, contrast that stuff with the ordinary and down-to-earth acts
carried out by God in Bethlehem. . .

and you will see what I mean when I say
that what makes Christmas truly special
is its lack of “specialness”—

the realistic and practical way in which it tells us
that, in this babe of Bethlehem,
God has, literally, become “down to earth.”

You see, despite what many folks may think,
this child whom we have come to call the Christ. . .
and this birth event we have come to call “Christ-mass”—
this whole thing was never intended
to be a marketing ploy
developed by an advertising firm.

Christmas was real. It actually happened.

Now, if it happened today, they'd have left Williams Lake or 100 Mile House,
probably with her father hot on their trail
because his pregnant underage daughter has run off
with that hotshot carpenter named Joe Somebody-or-Other
who worked on the addition to the high school
and met Marie during a lunch hour.

They would be driving some clunker of a car—
a ramshackle Toyota Tercel or an old Chevy Cavalier—
and they'd be looking for a cheap hotel
somewhere on Kingsway, maybe,
within a short drive of Vancouver General Hospital.

Joe drove on Kingsway once when he was down in Vancouver
with some beer-drinking buddies. . .
and all the motels and car lots and fast food places
seemed like pretty uptown stuff to a small-town guy.

Anyway, in the rain and in the dark,
with their cracked and pitted wipers doing precious little
to keep the streaked windshield clean enough
to read the street signs. . .and give them a hint
of where they were in the city—

they'd probably miss the Grandview exit off the freeway
heading toward the 2nd Narrows Bridge. . .
and be forced to take the Hastings Street turnoff
around the Cassiar Connector.

And maybe because either or both of them
had been at Playland once when they were kids,
they'd feel like they were doing okay until they got lost again
around Cordova and Powell somewhere in the downtown eastside.

Their car would be coughing miserably;
Joe would be hacking from having smoked too much;

the floor of the car would be littered
 with MacDonald's Cheeseburger cartons;
 and Marie would be stretched out on the back seat
 looking sick and scared. . .
 rubbing her swollen and painful stomach.

And with the car on its last legs and their money just about gone,
 Joe would pull the old heap into some all-night gas station,
 fast talk the attendant from Somalia
 into letting them drive into the service bay
 and sleep for the night.

And right there, over the grease rack
 and next to the red, Snap-On tool box—
 with a German Shepherd patrolling the office
 and an old wino and a frightened refugee as witnesses,
 the Son of God would be born.

That's impossible! we blurt out. it would never happen like that. . .never.
 But it did. . .at least, that's more or less how it all went 2000 years ago.

And not only that, either—for this newborn
 was not your anonymous, run-of-the-mill
 carpenter's kid born with a hammer in his hand.
 This was the Saviour of the world!

And here, of course, is where the whole down-to-earth event
 gets stretched almost beyond belief
 as it stretches to include the whole world.

For to imagine that a baby could be born
 in such circumstance is possible;
 and to even imagine that God could somehow
 be a part of this play in some special way is conceivable;

but to believe that, in the end, in the shadow of the cross,
 in the last scene of the last act--

to believe that this baby-now-grown-man
 wouldn't whip off his robes and reveal himself as God. . .
 but actually, really, suffer and die—
 to believe that he would go through all of that
 and do it willingly for us—that's hardest of all to believe
 because that's not the way real gods act.

The real gods we know come with baseball bats or hockey sticks,
 footballs or basketballs in their hands
 while sporting multi-million dollar salaries
 and endorsements for Coke or Jockey Shorts or Nike

Real gods show up on movie screens or on YouTube
 and turn up at award ceremonies in designer clothing.
 Real gods are the powerful movers-and-shakers of this world
 who come armed with stock portfolios
 or mega-online shopping sites,
 extensive real-estate or media holdings
 or a listing of their board directorships.

Real gods don't come in mangers. . .and they don't live in obscurity. . .
 and they don't die without dignity. . .but this God did. Our God did.

And that's why Christmas is so down-to-earth
 because it demonstrates so clearly that there is a direct link—
 a straight line between the cradle and the cross. . .
 between life and death. . .and between death and life.

Now, I am sure some of you are saying to yourselves. . .or out loud:
 "Hergesheimer, why do we have to talk about crosses and dying and death
 at Christmas. . .especially this Christmas. . .when life
 is hard enough, depressing enough, and dark enough?
 Why do we have to ruin this time of festive joy and new life?"

Well, we may or may not know that on the days immediately following Christmas,
 the church year calendar commemorates the stoning of Stephen,
 the first Christian martyr, on December 26;

on the 28th we remember the slaughter
of the innocent children by Herod's troops
in his attempt to find and kill the child, Jesus. . .
and Sunday's text tells the story of Simeon's prophecy spoken to Mary
about how the birth. . .and the eventual death. . .of her son
will be like a "sword in her heart."

You see, "real Christmas" doesn't shy away from talk about death
because real Christmas. . .and real life. . .and real faith
aren't afraid of dealing with issues of life and death.

Now, certainly, at Christmas, we do, indeed,
celebrate the birth of the Saviour, but what we often forget,
either conveniently or unconsciously, is that this child,
this Jesus, was born. . .in order to die—
and it was by his dying that he gave, and still gives life to this world.

In the same way, we who claim to be the beneficiaries of his birth and death;
we who call ourselves his follower and his disciples;
we who gather around his manger
hoping to catch a brief glimpse of his face—
and the glory shining within it--
we. . .we are also born to die. . .to die with Christ
in order to be able to live for Christ. . .and to live for others. . .
to live to give ourselves to others.

Let me close now with a true story—a true story that illustrates
this intimate connection between the cradle and the cross.

Years ago, a missionary was serving in South Korea.
A young Christian woman was expecting a baby,
and, on Christmas Eve, she went into labour.

There was a snowstorm in progress, but the woman knew
that if she could just get to the house of the missionary,
that she would have the help she needed
to bring her baby into the world.

So, she put on all the clothes she could and started out alone, on foot.
However, several miles from home, her labour pains
came more frequently and with more intensity
and the mother knew she could make it to her destination.

She managed to climb down underneath an old bridge
that gave her a bit of shelter from the storm
and there, alone, in the middle of the night,
she gave birth to a beautiful baby boy.

Immediately she removed her coat, and then, piece by piece,
the rest of her clothing and wrapped them around the child
until he looked like a cumbersome little cocoon.
Then, too exhausted to do anything else, she fell asleep.

The next morning dawned brightly and the missionary awoke
with a song in her heart. After all, it was Christmas Day. . .
and there were so many people she wanted to visit,
so she packed her car and started on her way.

A mile or so down the road, the engine sputtered and stopped,
right at the top of an old bridge.
As the missionary opened the door
in order to get out and look under the hood,
she thought she heard a baby crying.

Following the sound, she went under the bridge
where she found a tiny, newborn, baby boy—
very hungry, but very much alive.
Next to the infant lay his mother. . .frozen to death.

The missionary picked up the child and took him to her home.
In time, she was permitted to adopt the boy,
and, as the years passed, she told him often
how his biological mother had given her life so that he might live.
Her son never tired of hearing the story
and asked her to repeat it again and again.

On his twelfth birthday, he asked the missionary
to take him to his mother's grave.

When they arrived, there was snow on the ground,
and he asked his missionary mother to wait
while he went to the graveside alone.

She watched her son as he trudged through the snow,
tears streaming down his cheeks. . .and, in amazement,
she saw him slowly unbutton his coat, remove it,
and gently lay it on the snowy grave.

Next, he removed his short, his pants, his shoes and socks
and carefully placed each item on the grave of his mother
who had given her all for him.

Finally, the missionary could watch no longer and went to her son,
placing her coat around his bare, shivering shoulders.

And through his tears, she heard him as he asked,
"Were you colder than this for me, mother?
Were you colder than this for me?"

And he knew that she had been.

Christmas is not a time for tacky sentiment or cultural claptrap.

Christmas is a time for giving thanks—

for giving thanks to God for giving God's Son. . .

for giving thanks to the Son for giving his life. . .

and, for giving thanks for the opportunity given to us
to give ourselves to others and for others—
so that they, along with us and whole creation—
that they and we and all things might have joy. . .
might have hope. . .and might have life.

Amen.

SDG