

24 December 2020
Christmas Eve, On the road to Incarnation
Luke 2:1-14
First Mennonite Church

You can tell a great deal about someone by whom that person visits. I want to share a story about Mahatma Gandhi, an Indian lawyer, who employed nonviolent resistance to lead the successful campaign for India's independence from British rule, earlier in the 20th century. One of his methods of non-violent protest was to make and wear his own clothing made of Indian cloth, and not wear clothing imported to India from Great Britain. He urged his followers in India to do the same—not to wear clothes made in England as their protest against English imperialism.¹

At the time, the Davies family was a prominent textile family in Great Britain. The family reasoned that if they invited Gandhi to visit the Manchester cotton mill workers, Gandhi might understand the suffering his action back in India was causing and would, as a result of the visit, abandon his protest.

When Gandhi went to England, he visited first the Manchester cotton mill workers, most of whom were unemployed. Many of these workers suffered terribly because of the textile boycott that Gandhi led in India.

Think about that for a moment. Among the first people that Gandhi visited in England, was not the Prime Minister, didn't go to 10 Downing Street, but visited with unemployed textile workers. Gandhi gave them his sympathy, he apologized for the harm that his movement had caused them, but he tried to explain to them the basis of his movement and his rationale. All of this was most revealing for who Gandhi was and the work in which he was engaged.

I tell you this story because it reveals something about the kind of God that is portrayed in the Bible. For example, in the book of Genesis, God visited an old couple, Abraham and Sarah, who were, in the eloquent words of the book of Hebrews, as good as dead (Hebrews 11:12). Though they had many possessions, they were failures on other levels. For one, they didn't have any land upon which their cattle and sheep could graze. They had no children, which meant they had no heir who would inherit their possessions, and thus, no one to carry on their family name. Yet, God chose to visit these folks with a promise of land, a son, and

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-lancashire-15020097>

that they would become a great nation if they would leave their homeland and go to a place God would show them.

Many years later, God visited Abraham and Sarah's ancestors when they were slaves in Egypt. Instead of paying a visit to the mighty and powerful Egyptian Pharaoh, God visited a too-scared to speak in public, tongue-tied person by the name of Moses who just happened to be on the run after killing an Egyptian guard. God visited Moses and called him to lead God's people out of Egypt. The deliverance from bondage in Egypt, was a concrete sign for the people of Israel that God actually cared for the poor, the weak, and the downtrodden. As captives in the land of Egypt, their only experience of god were the gods of the Egyptian Pharaoh. Those gods were always on the side of the powerful and mighty kings. But in the Exodus, the Hebrew people discovered that God cares for the poor and the weak because God freed them from bondage.

Come to think of it, God visited all sorts of characters throughout the Bible. Characters like King David, who, because of the trappings of political power, thought he could do whatever he wanted, so he ordered the murder of Uriah the Hittite, to cover up his adultery with Bathsheba. Then there was Jacob, one of the pillars of the people of Israel, who cheated his brother Esau. God visited Joseph, that spoiled and haughty dreamer. God also called Matthew to be a disciple, even though he was a tax collector for the Roman occupied forces. Tax collectors get a uniformly bad press in the gospels as robbers of the widows and the orphans.

When it comes to Christmas in our culture, we run the risk of sugar-coating the season. Smiling children, perfectly behaved; presents chosen with care, impeccably wrapped, and received with gratitude; festive choirs and food and drink in abundance around crowded tables of happy families.

Luke begins his story of Christmas, not with joyous family gatherings or accounts of powerful, influential, and perfect people up in the palaces of Rome or Jerusalem, but with old people at the temple, with poor shepherds out in the fields on the night shift, and with a peasant couple named Mary and Joseph. One could hardly imagine more ordinary people such as these, and out of the way places like Nazareth and Bethlehem.

Through-out the rest of the gospel of Luke-Acts, we repeatedly encounter Luke's stress upon God's Advent among the poor and the lowly. In Luke's beatitudes, Jesus says not "*blessed are the poor in spirit*", like it says in Matthew (Matthew

5:3), but “*blessed are you who are poor*” (Luke 6:20). The very first words of Jesus's ministry are those read from Isaiah's scroll: “the spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.”

Knowing who God visited and called tell a great deal about who God is. What do God's visits into human history tell us about God? In a nutshell, the promise of Christmas is that God has chosen to dwell not with the high and mighty, but with the lowly, the broken, those considered “nothing” by this world. And here, amid the weakness and vulnerability of human birth, God makes God's intentions for humanity fully known. God is love, John writes, and here Luke portrays that love made manifest, God becoming a vulnerable human, like us. As Philippians 2 puts it:

*though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.* (Philippians 2:6-7).

The genius of Luke's story, of course, is that he portrays all this through the simple, sympathetic, and even everyday characters of a young mother, father, and common shepherds. If God can work in and through such ordinary—and even unsavory characters—we are left to wonder, perhaps God can also work in and through characters like us. Luke wants, I think, to make sure we realize that it is not just human flesh “in general” that God takes on in Christ; it is our flesh. And it is not simply history “in general” that God enters via this birth, it is our history and our very lives to which God is committed.

This year the Covid-19 Pandemic has wreaked havoc with our Christmas cultural traditions. There's so much we can't do or have chosen not to do out of concern for our vulnerable neighbours. But let us never forget that Christmas is all about the incarnation. The Word became flesh, flesh and bone, living dust, incarnate among us. You and me.

After you leave this YouTube page, close your web browser, and go on to other things, remember that this story of long ago is not only about angels and shepherds, a mother, father, and their new-born. It is also about us, all of us gathered virtually around our computer screens. God came at Christmas for us, that we might have hope and courage amid our struggles, anxieties, and fears—

into all of the dark and dangerous times and places of our lives. God came as a tiny vulnerable baby who would redeem the world.

When God became incarnate in humanity, God did not come to those who were high and mighty, holy and perfect. God came to dwell with the meek and lowly, with the broken and imperfect—with the very people who make up the Christmas story that we read every year. God continues to come and dwell with folks like us, even today.

“See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them as their God; they will be God’s people, and God will be with them (Revelation 20:3-4). Amen