

Christmas Eve 2023

Love What is Real
By the Rev. Salying Wong

Jesus came into the real world. Luke, in his gospel, takes pains to tell us this. Jesus was born while Augustus was emperor of Rome and Quirinius was the governor of Syria. Mary and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem for a census for taxation. While the historical details may not be completely accurate, the picture is real. What can be more real than the burden of taxes and power-mongering politicians that drive people from their homes? Even today, when we listen to the news, what's considered real are the politicians who are often making life harder for people rather than easier. It's the little people that suffer, caught in the drama of power. Jesus was born into the real world.

Christmas is considered the Feast of the Incarnation. What does that mean? It means that God loves what is real. God doesn't love us as we could be or should be, despite our faults, despite our distrust. God loves us in the very life we live and in the content of who we are. This love is so great, that God becomes one of us, to get really, really close to us, to know us in the life we live, in our heartbreak and in our precious and vulnerable joy. The name of this love is "Emmanuel," God-with-us.

What is this love? I've noticed we use the word love quite broadly, to the point where it isn't quite obvious what the phrase, "I love my son" means from, "I love ice cream." It is used so easily that sometimes we invoke the word "love" when we are afraid of the work of love—the work that sometimes means sacrifice, being courageous, dying to self, and not getting what we want. Or, when we want to cover up difficulties and not speak the truth, we can simplify disharmony too much by saying, "Can't we just love each other?" We feel the lack of such simplistic pleas when we consider our relationships—with our families, with our spouses, with our co-workers. So many relationships are not destinations of love,

but, at best, the work of trying to love in the midst of unfinished, unpolished business.

This is where Jesus meets us. Jesus is God saying, "I'm here and I get it. I'm here and I will help you. I'm here and I love you. This Christmas, I encourage you to consider how God loves you in your real life, in your unfinished, unpolished business. I encourage you to sustain yourself on this love in all that is asked of you, even if love breaks your heart. Let Christmas show you how to love what is real.