

December 24, 2021 - Christmas Eve Year C

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“Taking Everything Personally”

At many points throughout my life, I have been told I take things too personally. I was a sensitive kid, who has grown up into a sensitive adult. As an adult, I take things even more personally now, rather than less. For a long time, this caused me great anxiety and frustration. As I have gotten older, though, I have come to terms with ‘taking everything personally’. Now, I try to embrace it.

Most of you have heard phrases like, “It isn’t personal” or “There are forces that are bigger than you and have no personal interest in you. Why are you taking it personally?” We often hear this around work, or around illness, or sometimes, during pandemics. We hear it in movies all the time - “This isn’t personal; it is just business, or politics.”

However, there isn’t a single place in Scripture, with perhaps a peculiar take on the Book of Ecclesiastes, that suggests even remotely that God’s creation and presence is impersonal, merely business, and has no particular interest in the individual person at all. Rather, every aspect of God’s presence is personal. Creation itself is intended to be taken personally.

When Gabriel the angel visits Mary, he tells her that she is God’s “favoured one”, that “God is *with you*”. It does not get much more personal than that. This ‘most favored’ status is also spoken to Jesus when Jesus is baptized later in the Gospel of Luke. We read:

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ Luke 3:21-22

This seems very personal, doesn’t it? I believe it is personal and it is meant to be personal. This is why, if you happen to be baptized into the church, which is the way we acknowledge your participation in the work and love of Christ, we repeat this phrase every time we remember our baptism or actually baptize somebody. The minister will say, while pouring the water over the head of the person, “*I baptize you in the name of the Father and*

of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. You are God's child, in whom God is well pleased." The whole sacrament is very intimate and very personal because God is intimate and personal.

I like to say the Christian faith is fueled and powered by paradox. These profound and apparently impersonal cosmic truths - God became human for the sake of humanity, Jesus is the salvation of all humankind, creation reflects the glory of God - are also deeply personal. Or rather, it is because they are deeply personal that they are cosmic truths - God became human because *you and I* are human, Jesus will save others because Jesus has saved me, because I am a created being I am called to shine the glory of God. One of my favorite masters of the paradoxical is GK Chesterton, who said:

"To love means loving the unlovable. To forgive means pardoning the unpardonable. Faith means believing the unbelievable. Hope means hoping when everything seems hopeless."

He also said this about Christmas:

Christmas is built upon a beautiful and intentional paradox; that the birth of the homeless should be celebrated in every home.

My very favorite master of the paradoxical, though, is Soren Kierkegaard, The Mad Dane as he was called. Kierkegaard thought the whole Christmas story was the height of absurdity, an utterly ridiculous tale of impoverishment, small towns, and, outrageously, a God becoming human - as a baby! Which is why Kierkegaard also thought the Christmas story was perfect and could only be inspired by the Holy Spirit. He once said this about Christmas:

"The most astounding phenomenon in the entire Bible and in all of history is the Incarnation. The infinite God crossing the cosmic divide between Himself and His creation; God showing up ... as a baby! The Christian mind reels in awe and wonder in trying to fathom the profound significance of the first Christmas."

Kierkegaard had a phrase for this kind of paradox, the distance between the human and the divine and God's willingness to cross that divide. He called this the "Infinite Qualitative Difference". Kierkegaard believed that it is only through the hidden, the absurd, and the outrageous that we could see signs of God in the world. The other gift to the world from Kierkegaard is how we understand and experience the modern world. Kierkegaard wrote from about 1835 to his death in 1855. One of his most popular and influential works was

called *The Concept of Anxiety*. The modern world created gulfs and divisions in the human experience of the world and within the spirit of the person such that the only proper response and reaction is anxiety. Kierkegaard says “anxiety as the dizzying effect of freedom, of paralyzing possibility, of the boundlessness of one’s own existence — a kind of existential **paradox of choice**.”¹ Anxiety may have always been with us, but now we are continually aware of it. It is also a creative force in Kierkegaard’s thought, and is most like the experience of dizziness. We are anxious because we always stand at the brink of the dizzying presence of freedom and possibility.

Today, then, we hear this amazing story of prophecy leading up to the birth of this little child in a manger because there was no room at the inn. The co-creator of the universe, Jesus, is born to a young woman, Mary, the same way you and I were born into this world. (As an aside, we think of a manger as a crib, but a manger is really a feeding trough made of stone. Jesus is born on a stone slab. Jesus is buried on a stone slab at the end of Luke’s Gospel. Also, ‘no room at the inn’ means ‘no room in the relative’s house because of the weird situation of Mary’s pregnancy so please stay downstairs with the animals’. This is a family situation that is filled with conflict and anxiety about Mary’s condition.)

We were talking about taking things personally. The great paradox is that this whole experience we celebrate on this night is very personal and it arises out of ancient history and cosmic trajectories. I think we often hear, “this is personal” and we make the Jesus story all about ‘me’. My problems, my situation, my life. The Gospel message of Jesus’ love for you is personal - the most personal of all messages - but the message is not about you. Jesus’ birth and life and ministry and death and resurrection always point us away from ourselves and toward, first and foremost, our neighbor, our enemies, our community, the earth and the living things of creation.

John 3:16 says, “*For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Son, Jesus Christ, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him*” (John 3:16-17). Everyone always forgets the second part of that verse. But it is the most important part - God so loved the world in order to save the world. God so loves you in order to save you.

The funny thing is, though, the paradox of it all, is that once this salvation happens, once we understand our relationship with God, our focus shifts away from ourselves to the same

¹ <https://www.themarginalian.org/2013/06/19/kierkegaard-on-anxiety-and-creativity/>

thing God cares about - everyone and everything else. What God takes personally - creation, humanity, people, creatures, rocks, trees - we now take personally. We are called to take what God takes personally...personally ourselves.

Listen to Psalm 8, one of my very favorite Psalms. Listen to how personally the Psalmist imagines God's relationship with the creatures of the planet:

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?*

*Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honour.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

I think it is probably more appropriate to read this psalm as saying, "Each sheep and ox, and each beast of the field, each bird of the air and each fish of the sea". It is in God's individual attention that makes creation and God so majestic.

Certainly, there are things that happen which are far bigger than any one individual. Right now, more volcanoes are going off in the world than since scientists began tracking volcanoes. Volcanoes do not have a personal concern about you and I. Ice caps melting do not think about a person or even people. A raging pandemic is not personal. But just because these things aren't personal doesn't mean we do not take them personally. We take them personally because they affect our world, our relationships, our lives, often directly and personally. Historically, pandemics will inevitably affect and impact each of us personally, either you directly or someone you know. Each pandemic, though, is different from the one before it. Unpredictable events are always disruptive, and nothing is more disruptive to human lives than a pandemic. This is a historical fact. Pandemics unzip the DNA of societies.

But impersonal things taken personally generate anxiety. We think anxiety is something to be overcome, first, and we overcome by taking control, second. But taking things personally does not mean we are in control of events that directly affect us. Mary does not control angels. Prophets do not control history. Disciples do not control salvation or faith. Instead, Mary finds peace by giving herself over to the experience of being God's favored child. "*Let it be unto me according to your will*", she says. This, by the way, is not submission. This is the essence of empowerment on Mary's part. Mary is empowered by her personal story, by a profoundly unknown future. She takes God personally, and therefore takes everything that God cares about personally.

Anxiety has become a sign that we are trying to universalize and depersonalize our experience. Anxiety asks that we separate ourselves from taking things so personally. But trying to decouple ourselves from the personal experience of this life is itself anxiety producing. In the strange and paradoxical ways of following Jesus, the way through all this anxiety, all this unknowing, all this apparent chaos, is to take it even more personally. And in taking this life more personally, we are called to see that anxiety in others and take it personally that others are suffering.

For God so loved the world, and in so loving the world, God so loves each of us. Taking this life personally, taking everything personally, means we begin to see the world the way God and Jesus see the world. In that paradox is the beginning of love, a love that is like a little child in a little manger, surrounded by animals, shepherds, parents, and angels who are personal witnesses to what God has done for each of us. Love cannot be an impersonal force, otherwise it is not love. Love is personal. Love cares about whatever love is focused upon. Love takes everything personally. John's first letter tells us "*God is Love*". God takes everything personally. So should we.

Once, when Jesus, the human expression of God's love on earth, was teaching the disciples and the crowds, Jesus understood that the gathered people were worried about the future and about what appear to be the inchoate and impersonal forces bearing down upon them - empires dominating the people, threats from powers natural and human beyond the borders, impoverishment threatening their families, suffering everywhere. Speaking to the people, Jesus told them how personally God regards each of them. Jesus said to the crowds, and to us today,

'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" ³²For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:25-33)

As we go out into the world on Christmas Eve, in this 22nd month of a global pandemic that never seems to end, faced with the threat of illness, crushing divisions within families, friendships, and nations, competing ideas about what is really going on, anxious awareness of vast impersonal things and events that have a very personal impact, remember that God wants us to know that God takes who we are and who we are meant to be with one another very personally. And in that great love that radiates forth tonight from this very simple place from a very ancient time, know that this love radiates even still for you, personally, because God takes you personally. God took it so personally, God did something outrageous and world-changing. God became human for your sake and mine. God takes everything personally. And so should we.

Merry Christmas!

Amen.