

In a little book that I keep in my library and that I love dearly, *A Third Look at Jesus*, Caesar is defined as, "Principalities and powers who work evil in the world...who exercise rule over individuals, over history and the world, causing sin, sickness, suffering, oppression, war, suffering and death."

And while we sometimes speak of the Pax Romana, the peace the Romans were able to enforce over the known world through socio-economic, cultural and military power, we can see Caesar's principalities and powers who work evil in the world - who oppress instead of liberate - as our story begins in the second chapter of Luke's Gospel.

We can see GRANDEUR (The quality or state of being grand: MAGNIFICENCE)

1) In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled.

2) This was the first enrollment, when Quirin'i-us was governor of Syria.

We can see one group of people who oppress another group of people, who control their very movement from one place to another, who control their very resources that keep them alive and make them give the little they own in the world to those who have everything,

So our story starts with GRANDEUR.

Do we see GRANDEUR in our world today? Who does it describe? What does it look like? When does it appear? Where do we find it? Why is it a part of our world?

Curious minds want to know.

Pope Francis, in his book *Christmas at the Nativity*, defines Jesus for us in the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke.

In Jesus, we see GRANDEUR turned upside down, as the Gospel life, life in the beloved community, is often (always?) an upside down life.

Our story quickly moves to LITTLE (Small in importance or interest: TRIVIAL)

1) And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city.

2) And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David,

3) to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

4) And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered.

5) And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

"That is where God is, in littleness," says Pope Francis, "This is the message: God does not rise up in grandeur, but lowers [Godself] into littleness. Littleness is the path that he chose to draw near to us, to touch our hearts, to save us, and to bring us back to what really matters.

Brothers and sisters, standing before the crib, we contemplate what is central, beyond all the pretty lights and decorations. We contemplate the child. In his littleness, God is completely present. Let us acknowledge this: "Baby Jesus, you are God, the God who becomes a child." Let us be amazed by this scandalous truth. The One who embraces the universe needs to be held in another's arms. The One who created the sun needs to be warmed. Tenderness incarnate needs to be cuddled. Infinite love has a minuscule heart that beats softly. The eternal Word is an "infant," a speechless child. The bread of life needs to be nourished. The creator of the world has no home. Today, all is turned upside down: God comes into the world in littleness. [God's] grandeur appears in littleness.

Let us ask ourselves: can we accept God's way of doing things? This is the challenge of Christmas: God reveals [Godself], but men and women fail to understand. God makes [Godself] little in the eyes of the world, while we continue to seek grandeur in the eyes of the world, perhaps even in [God's] name. God lowers [Godself] and we try to

become great. The Most High goes in search of shepherds, the unseen in our midst, and we look for visibility; we want to be seen. Jesus is born in order to serve, and we spend a lifetime pursuing success. God does not seek power and might; God asks for tender love and interior littleness.

This is what we should ask Jesus at Christmas: the grace of littleness. “Lord, teach us to love littleness. Help us to understand that littleness is the way to authentic greatness.” What does it mean, concretely, to accept littleness? In the first place it is to believe that God desires to come into the little things of our life; [God] wants to inhabit our daily lives, the things we do each day at home, in our families, at school, and in the workplace. Amid our ordinary lived experience, [God] wants to do extraordinary things. [God’s] is a message of immense hope. Jesus asks us to rediscover and value the little things in life. If [God] is present there, what else do we need? Let us stop pining for a grandeur that is not ours to have. Let us put aside our complaints and our gloomy faces, and the greed that never satisfies! Littleness and the amazement of that little child: this is the message.”

Do we see LITTLENESS in our world today? Who does it describe? What does it look like? When does it appear? Where do we find it? Why is it a part of our world?

Curious minds want to know.

Let me read you an article from the newspaper The Texas Tribune from December 22, 2022.

Journalist Jayme Lozano wrote it.

The title of the article is “Buses from Texas drop off more than 100 migrants in a bitterly cold Washington, D.C., on Christmas Eve.”

As I read the article, listen carefully with the ears of the heart, aures cordis, to try to answer the WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE and WHY questions about GRADUER and about LITTLENESS,

Where is Caesar in this story?

Where is Jesus in this story?

“More than 100 migrants bused from Texas arrived at Vice President Kamala Harris’ residence in Washington, D.C., on Christmas Eve,” she wrote — “enduring freezing temperatures in the state’s latest instance of sending migrants to cities led by Democrats.

The Washington Post reported Sunday that volunteers who greeted the migrants received word that Gov. Greg Abbott had sent about 110 to 130 men, women and children on three buses that arrived at the Naval Observatory on Saturday night. Videos shared on social media show many of them clutching blankets over their shoulders in the 18-degree weather after the two-day trip.

Abbott, a Republican, began sending migrants who arrived at the Texas-Mexico border to other cities in April as a way to antagonize the Biden administration. When the first bus sent to Harris’ residence arrived in September, Abbott went on NBC’s “Meet the Press” saying, “She’s the border czar, and we felt that if she won’t come down to see the border, if President [Joe] Biden will not come down and see the border, we will make sure they see it firsthand.”

The cities also include Chicago, New York and Philadelphia, and their Democratic leaders have largely seen the program as a political stunt that uses people as pawns. By the end of August, the state had already paid nearly \$13 million sending busloads of migrants out of Texas.

The governor’s office has not confirmed he sent the latest buses and did not respond to a request for comment Sunday afternoon. But in a statement last month, Abbott said the “busing strategy has successfully provided much-needed relief to our border communities.”

In a statement to The Washington Post, the White House condemned the action and said Abbott did not coordinate with federal or local authorities before the migrants were dropped off in the cold.

Aid groups and officials in El Paso and other Texas cities have struggled to keep up with the number of incoming migrants amid uncertainty over whether Title 42 will continue. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled last week that the

pandemic-era health policy, which allows the federal government to rapidly remove migrants, including those seeking asylum, can continue as the legal battle over ending the program is still underway.

In a letter to Biden on Tuesday, Abbott said the state is ill-equipped to house thousands of migrants who are coming into the country. Abbott also acknowledged the cold temperatures in Texas.

"Your policies will leave many people in the bitter, dangerous cold as the polar vortex moves into Texas," Abbott wrote. The letter does not mention plans to send more buses of migrants to Harris' home.

El Paso declared a state of emergency last week in response to freezing temperatures and shelters being unable to house all of the migrants. On Friday night, the City Council extended that declaration for 30 days.

On Christmas morning, members of the Texas National Guard constructed a barbed-wire fence at the El Paso border. In a tweet, Abbott said he was grateful to them for serving on Christmas Day.

As a part of the beloved community at Triune, we must go barefooted and openhearted in search of the historical Jesus.

We must help each other look closely to see the little Jesus, the poor, homeless Jesus who was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger because there was no room for him anywhere around him.

We must love this Jesus, for this Jesus loves us more than anything in the whole, wide world.

And we must help each other listen carefully to the Jesus a few chapters over from our story this Christmas Eve who will say:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
19 to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." (Luke 4:18-19, RSV)

So how do we find this little Jesus who in the upside down beloved community is the Jesus who will heal every hurt and right every wrong.

Let me tell you a story about where we might find him.

It all begins on a Christmas tree lot off of South Pleasantburg Drive near my house.

Every year, when I walk onto a Christmas tree lot and stand in the middle of the trees, I listen to the people around me.

"Look at this one! It'll be the biggest tree in the neighborhood!"

"This'll be the prettiest tree people've ever seen!"

"This one'll be HUGE!"

But in the cold night air, under the starry sky, I'm not looking for a tree that can do something for me.

I'm looking for what I can do for the tree.

I'm looking for the smallest and most forgotten one.

The one in the far corner leaning against the old wooden fence out of the lime light and away from any prospective buyers.

The one with most of its branches barely hanging on and where there are a few gaps where the branches just gave

up and fell off days ago.

I pick that one to take home.

I pick that one to put in the old, trusty stand (the one I cuss every year because no matter how I maneuver the tree and screw in the ding dong screws the tree still leans a little too far to the left or a little too far to the right, a little too far forward or a little too far backward) and wrap with strings of bright, colorful lights, and adorn with ornaments my friends have given me over the years and my children have made for me with their own hands and hearts.

I pick that one.

Though it's the smallest and most forgotten one, I give it the biggest and most remembered parts of myself.

Yep, I have a Charlie Brown heart.

Here is the great scene in A Charlie Brown Christmas.

Charlie Brown and Linus are on the Christmas tree lot.

Linus: Gee, do they still make wooden Christmas trees?

Charlie Brown: This little green one here seems to need a home.

Linus: I don't know, Charlie Brown. Remember what Lucy said? This doesn't seem to fit the modern spirit.

Charlie Brown: I don't care. We'll decorate it and it'll be just right for our play. I think it needs me.

"I think it needs me."

Wow, in my humble opinion, that's one of the greatest lines in the history of television.

Maybe one of the greatest lines in history.

If we could all live our lives saying those words every day and meaning them, what a better world it would be.

This coming year, let's treat OUR WORLD the way Charlie Brown treated the little green tree.

Let's treat PEOPLE the way Charlie Brown treated the little green tree.

Let's treat OURSELVES the way Charlie Brown treated the little green tree.

In the end, Linus would say -

"I never thought it was such a bad little tree. It's not bad at all, really. Maybe it just needs a little love."

Wow! Another great line in the same 30 minute special.

How amazing was Charles Schultz?

Maybe the world DOES just need a little love.

Come love the world with me.

Come have a Charlie Brown heart with me.

Amen.

Here is how St. Francis found this little Jesus who in the upside down beloved community is the Jesus who will heal every hurt and right every wrong.

Did you know St. Francis created the first nativity scene 801 years ago, in 1223 CE., in Greccio, Italy, about 50 miles from Rome?

He spent the years 2219 and 2220 in the Holy Land, where he humbly walked the grounds of The Church of the Nativity, a church built in Bethlehem on the traditional site where Jesus was born.

There were no models made of fired clay and paint that a person in Greccio might have used to represent the ones who gathered in the stable around the manger on that very first Christmas night.

No, there were only simple, ordinary, everyday people like you and me there in Greccio.

Have you ever tried to convey your deepest thoughts and feelings through symbols, because you just couldn't express them through language?

Well, it happened to St. Francis on that day.

He wanted to show and not just tell what he had seen, heard and felt on that night he had spent in Bethlehem.

So he got an idea.

He asked a friend to prepare a cave with a hay-filled manger and live animals on the outskirts of Greccio.

The first biographer of St. Francis, Brother Thomas of Celano, wrote that Francis wanted to "represent the birth of that Child in Bethlehem in such a way that with our bodily eyes we may see what he suffered for lack of the necessities of a newborn babe and how he lay in manger between the ox and [donkey]."

In the evening, Francis asked those simple, ordinary, everyday people of Greccio to play the parts of the simple, ordinary, everyday people who might have been in the stable around the manger in Bethlehem all of those years ago.

And in the stillness and quiet of that Italian night on 1223 CE, the gospel story came alive once again.

Words on a page became people with hearts beating and feelings flowing.

In our everyday, barefooted, openhearted quest to find the historical Jesus over the mountains and through the woods of history, the people of Greccio found a small part of him on that Christmas Eve with St. Francis.

And, in the ways of miracles, or magical realism (which, by the way, is the form I like to use to write my stories) tradition tells us that a living, breathing baby appeared in the manger and that Francis lifted him up to his tattered, worn frock and held him tenderly.

Pope Francis, who chose his papal name after the poor little human from Assisi, wrote of this moment in Greccio with St. Francis and the people on Christmas Eve, "Implicitly, it summons us to follow [Jesus] along the path of humility, poverty, and self-denial that leads from the manger of Bethlehem to the cross."

May it be so.