

# The Charlotte Post

The Voice of the Black Community

1531 Camden Road Charlotte, N.C. 28203

Gerald O. Johnson CEO/PUBLISHER

Robert L. Johnson CO-PUBLISHER/GENERAL MANAGER

Herbert L. White EDITOR IN CHIEF

MATTERS OF OPINION

## Faith, poverty: Rediscover the back story of Christmas

By Robert M. Franklin

NATIONAL NEWSPAPER PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION

This year I viewed the familiar Christmas story through a new lens. Hurricane Katrina and the proposed federal budget compel us to pay attention to the 'back story' of the Christmas narrative. It's a story about fragile families, poverty, and the good community.

You don't have to be Christian to know something about the foreground of the basic narrative. While traveling a great distance, an inconvenience imposed by a government census, a young, pregnant mother realizes that she is about to give birth. The couple learns that there's no room in the local inn (maybe, they lacked sufficient personal responsibility to make an advance reservation.) In an humble setting, surrounded by strangers and warm animals, a special child was born. For most people, that's about as far as the plot goes. But there are other interesting things unfolding in the background.

Earlier this month, Capitol police arrested more than 100 people of faith, many of them my friends. They were protesting a budget passed by the House of Representatives that Rep. Harry Reed (D-Nev.) called a war on the middle class and poor. At the same time, it awards tax cuts and other nice gifts to the rich. Meanwhile, leaders from the Gulf left Capitol Hill with the promise of more resources even as the evacuees reminded them of their continued suffering of displacement, unemployment and homelessness.

Watching all this, I realized that the complexity behind Christmas is trying to break through the holiday selling and shopping frenzy. Let's look again at the back story.

First, although the popular version of the story presents images of joy and peace, there's an awful lot of political violence in the background. King Herod seems to operate with unchecked executive power as he orders the murder of the male babies under 2 years of age after being outsmarted by the wise men on his payroll.

Second, isn't it odd that although Joseph is part of the royal lineage of David, that doesn't seem to help him much when the going gets rough. The surprise birth on the road places him, a productive, working-class carpenter in his hometown, in the precarious position of having to rely on strangers for assistance. Through no fault of his own, he has to depend on others.

Third, the fact that the parents of the child were not married at the time of 'conception' added a stigma to an already fragile family that may have further complicated their relationship with their extended families and home town folks. Still, amazingly, the couple stayed together and the baby was born into a uniquely blended family.

And, finally, the fact that the child finds refuge in a manger suggests that they did not have the resources to command a better environment. But, in the end, they were surrounded by people who cared for, and supported them. They were strangers who become a good community for each other.

After a difficult year for so many of our fellow citizens, perhaps the back story of Christmas offers many lessons and challenges. We must be suspicious of unchecked executive power and hold officials accountable for policies that affect children and families. Second, those who are doing well economically should show greater compassion and generosity for those who have slipped into poverty through no fault of their own. At any moment, the economy could change and we could join them. Third, we should not indulge in the self-righteousness of stigmatizing people who have made bad decisions but are trying to make the best of it. They need our support, not our judgment. Finally, we all can become members of the good community that shows solidarity with those who feel rejected and outcast.

I did my shopping and enjoyed Christmas cheer and fellowship, but remembered that there's a lot more to that story than angels, wise men, and a sweet little baby boy.

ROBERT M. FRANKLIN is Presidential Distinguished Professor of Social Ethics, Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta.



### Connect with The Post

Send letters to The Charlotte Post, P.O. Box 30144 Charlotte, NC 28230 or e-mail [editorial@thecharlottepost.com](mailto:editorial@thecharlottepost.com).

We edit for grammar, clarity and space. Include your name and daytime phone number. Letters and photos will not be returned by mail unless accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope.



## 'Complicated' love with the South

Driving Neyah Angelique Curry, my 3-year-old granddaughter, to Augusta, Ga. to see her great-grandmother gave me plenty of time and reasons to reflect on an Associated Press observation that, "Blacks have a complicated love affair with the South."



GEORGE E. CURRY  
love affair with the South."

The AP is running a series of stories on what it means to be Southern. A story with a Birmingham, Ala. dateline, referring to Southern blacks, noted: "Their ancestors were enslaved in the region for generations, then Jim Crow laws pushed them to the back of the bus. From inner-city slums to old plantation counties, being black too often still means a second-class existence."

"Yet, surveys show blacks who live in the South are more likely than any other racial or ethnic group - even whites - to identify themselves as Southerners. It's a label millions claim with pride and affection, yet uneasiness."

I was born and grew up in Tuscaloosa, Ala. and went to college in Tennessee and spent my childhood summers between Reform, Ala., my father's hometown, and Johnson City, Tenn., where

my Aunt Julia Mae Stuart Cousins and, later, the majority of my other uncles and aunts moved. Although I have spent my adult life outside the South, I still consider myself a Southerner.

I say that with a mixture of pride and discomfort. The extreme pride stems from the way we were reared, the interest others took in us as children, the extended community that protected us and a basic humanity characterized by good manners and kindness.

Neyah lives in Silver Spring, Md., and in some ways, I wish she could grow up in the South. Short of that, trips to see Great Grandma Brownlee in Augusta, her great aunts, great uncles and cousins in Johnson City, Tenn. and an occasional trip to Tuscaloosa will have to suffice.

In some respects, black Southerners are like a family. We can fight among ourselves - and even criticize our region - but we don't allow others that luxury. Even though those of my generation grew up in rigid segregation, we felt Southern whites were no worse than northern whites. In fact, they were better because they were more honest about their feelings toward African-Americans. Because the South was more honest in dealing with its problems, more racial progress has been made in

the South than any other region.

I was so sheltered growing up in the South that I had no idea how bad life was in some northern cities. When I went to Knoxville College, my Up North friends would brag about their hometowns. It was only later that I realized that our townhouse-style housing project in Tuscaloosa was better than the deteriorated housing I saw Up North.

A black southerner's defense of the region is usually different from white southerners. Many southern whites are still fighting the Civil War, not realizing that not only is the war over, but they lost. Or, did they? It's hard to tell when you look at Congress.

To be fair, many in the younger generations have lived in integrated neighborhoods and attended desegregated public schools. Their lives are considerably different from those of us who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s. They have been elected president of their student body, have a chance to be homecoming queen and are more likely to have friends from different races.

However, those of us that witnessed Alabama Gov. George C. Wallace standing in the schoolhouse door at the University of Alabama in a futile effort to maintain segregation, those of us who

remember Bear Bryant's all-white football teams at 'Bama and those of us that marched in order to ride in the front of the bus or to get rid of humiliating "Colored" water fountains have a difficult time cheering for Alabama - even when some of their athletic teams could pass for being on a Historically Black College campus.

We're torn between welcoming the progress and not forgetting the pain of our past. To this day, I never pull for a University of Alabama team. In fact, I pull for them to lose. The pain is too much to ignore or to forget. Yet, the progress at 'Bama is undeniable and they are to be applauded for it.

My Southern pride is still intact and Rev. Joseph Lowery, the civil rights icon, explained why.

"The changes that have taken place in the South came at the initiative and the insistence of southern blacks," he told the AP. "It was southern blacks who led the way."

Papa Curry will have to explain how this happened when Neyah gets older.

GEORGE E. CURRY is editor-in-chief of the National Newspaper Publishers Association News Service and BlackPressUSA.com. He appears on National Public Radio as part of "News and Notes with Ed Gordon."

## A new Iraq or a new New Orleans?

Why have we spent as much as \$1 billion per week to build a 'New Iraq,' yet our compassionate government, headed by George Bush and his boys and girls, cannot find a billion a week to spend on New Orleans and those wiped out by Hurricane Katrina?

What kind of a country is this anyway? What kind of people are running this show? Immediate expenditures totaling billions of taxpayer dollars to rebuild a country we intentionally destroyed, but four months after the worst catastrophe in this country our government has hardly moved to take care of its own.

Yes, our eyes have been opened to several realities since the hurricanes hit the gulf coast, most of which we knew all along but were afraid or ashamed to admit, but this is ridiculous. Now we must face our deepest fears; black and poor people must look at this country in a different light now; and we must respond, because we cannot like what we see. We cannot turn deaf ears to what is being screamed at us: "You don't count!"

Yes, it took a hurricane, but as Eric Benet says on his latest CD, "Hurricane" released, by the way, prior to Katrina, "Sometimes what you fear

the most is what you need, to find that road, right around that curve a lesson learned, now that I have the eyes to see. A hurricane - sometimes the only way to wash away the pain." How prophetic.

The president is touting his "plan" for victory in Iraq, now that the oil wells are secured and the petrodollar is back in full swing in that country. He is spending our money like a drunken sailor, urinating on us and telling us it's a spring rain. His attention is always on the New Iraq and seldom on a New Orleans. Victims of Katrina are testifying at congressional hearings, while Bush is busy justifying a war that he started under false pretenses.

Bush and his ilk try to instill guilt in those who want to withdraw from Iraq by saying if we leave the 2000-plus who have died, would have died in vain. Two questions: Won't those killed in Iraq, no matter when the war ends or how it ends, have died in vain anyway since they were there because of lies and deceit?

And what about the folks in New Orleans who died as a result of mismanagement by FEMA's "Brownie" (the guy George Bush said was doing a fine job). Did they die in vain? Did the 911 victims die in vain, since we have not caught Osama Bin Laden? Hmmm.

We cut and ran from New Orleans, but in New Iraq we will stay until the people "put their lives back together," "until they are back on their

feet," "until they have a stable government." We can't have a timetable for leaving Iraq, but we certainly came up with a timetable for putting New Orleans evacuees out of their hotel room shelters. George Bush says, "We have \$62 billion on the table" for New Orleans (that's the problem, George; it's "on the table"); but, we have about \$250 billion "on the ground" (and in the pockets of corporate raiders) in New Iraq.

What hypocrisy! What disdain is being shown for the people of New Orleans by Mr. Compassion himself. Why so much concern for the New Iraq and little or no concern for New Orleans. Could it be economics?

In an interview, Bush said, "Call me anything, but don't call me a racist." Well, here goes. Bush is arrogant, vindictive, egomaniacal, and aloof; he's disconnected, discombobulated, befuddled, entrenched, recalcitrant, obstinate; he's corny, spoiled, ignorant, scornful, disrespectful, phony, condescending, and just plain weird. (Maybe it would be better if he were just a racist.) I am sure there is some good stuff somewhere inside this guy, I just haven't seen it.

Bush spends billions for the New Iraq, while he emphatically brags about asking Congress to allocate a measly \$1.2 billion to stockpile bird flu vaccine, which by the way will only buy enough to vaccinate 20 million citizens. I

wonder which 20 million they will be. Bush's secretary of defense should be happy with that decision; according to an article I read, Rumsfeld stands to make "a fortune on royalties as a panicked world population scrambles to buy a drug worthless in curing effects of alleged Avian Flu." Another article stated, "Among the beneficiaries of the run on Tamiflu is Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who was chairman of Gilead [Sciences] and owns at least \$5 million of the stock, which has jumped from \$35 in April [2005] to \$47." Can you say, Cheney and Halliburton?

Finally, Bush says the New Iraq is comparable to the nascent years of the United States. Oh, really? What if a "coalition of the willing" had come to this country during the Revolutionary War to liberate enslaved black people from the tyranny under which they suffered? Too bad there was no coalition back then - with cowboy George W. leading the charge.

Instead, George W. is leading the charge to build a New Iraq but has little time for and will not allocate adequate resources to build a New Orleans. Hey George. Be sure to close the door to the bank vault behind you when you and the guys finally get as much money as you can carry. Okay?

JAMES E. CLINGMAN, a professor at the University of Cincinnati, is former editor of the Cincinnati Herald.