

“God’s Baby Talk”

Luke 2:8-16

⁸ Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. ¹⁰ Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. ¹¹ For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this *will be* the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.”

¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying:

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace, goodwill toward all!”^[b]

¹⁵ So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, “Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.

Luke 2:8-16 NKJ Version

Elizabeth Bettenhausen wrote a story about a young girl lying on her stomach looking at the crèche under the Christmas tree. “God’s my size!” she exclaimed. She ran to her parents... “God’s my size! God’s my size!” Bettenhausen says that eye-level with a baby is a good position from which to do theology.

I tend to agree. Looking back to the birth of my children, I have to say that although being pregnant and giving birth wasn’t an especially delightful experience, it was a significantly spiritual time in our lives. I can relate to the god

in a child's eyes more than I relate to the Italian classic paintings of muscular European male gods. Especially at Christmas, God is less like a come-of-age, post-modern adult and more like a toddler laughing at peek-a-boo.

But sophisticated adults tend to look at God in a manger and say,

- “This can't be God! This is a bawling baby!” or
- “This can't be God! This baby is Jewish.” Or
- “This can't be God. This baby is poor.”
- “This baby is an illegitimate refugee.”
- “This baby is, well, a baby.”

Children look at the baby and say, “God's our size!” Adults look at the baby, shuffle their feet and mutter theological platitudes:

- “The Ancient Near East had many incarnation myths... this is but one in a long list of miraculous virgin birth stories”
- “This whole Jesus thing wouldn't have been necessary without our sin.”
- “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Christian theology, says Bettenhausen, is done by adults for adults. We judge theology by how well it fits the lives and thoughts of adults. When we accuse a person of “playing God” or urge them to “accept God” it is not a gurgling infant or a three-year-old refugee we have in mind. God needs to be dignified, after all.

“God Newborn” by Elizabeth Bettenhausen. *Christianity & Crisis*, Dec. 12, 1988.

But Christmas celebrates God as a newborn, wholly dependent. And hear me – dependency does not mean decreased or incomplete. At creation, the Creator is recorded as creating in the plural – both the human and the divine were in the plural “let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness...” (Gen. 1:26).

The birth of Jesus – the Divine becoming human – is a continuation of the Genesis story. The Holy becomes a child, dependent and helpless. It says something about the dependence of those who choose a spiritual life. We are inter-related, one of us to another. We are dependent on others whether we like it or not.

Martin Luther said that when God speaks to humans, God always speaks in baby talk. God does this, says Luther, because God is love. Therefore, God never forgets that no matter how old or how big we become, we are still dependent, especially in matters of faith.

So God speaks in baby talk. It is possible, I think, that there are times when we cannot handle the whole truth because we are limited in our understanding of the spirit world. So God talks baby talk to us.

Have you ever watched grown mature adults interact with a baby? “Goo, goo, ga, ga.” We become nonsensical babblers. We become baby talking fools. And that’s good, say the childhood developmentalists. Erik Erikson taught us that trust is developed in a child during the very first weeks of its life by all these little rituals of greeting. All the cooing and tickling, grinning and silly chatter that go on between parents and their children is essential as a building block for one’s whole life. The absence of this leads to deficiencies in adulthood.

Babies don’t need to be told what it means when Daddy says, “Cootchie, chootchie, coo.” Love needs no explanation.

William Willimon, *“On a Wild and Windy Mountain”*, 1984.

I know a grandfather who built a wooden box to go on top of the dining room table. In it, he placed a mattress and some blankets. He put his baby grandchildren in the homemade play pen so they could be eye-to-eye with the other people in the room. Babies don’t need to be told what love is; love needs no explanation.

There is a time for complex theological theories and lofty ideals. Christmas Sunday is not one of them. In plain baby talk, toothless shepherds are grinning and peering over the edge of a manger, wise old guys from the East are following stars – this is the way of love. This is a god who comes to us wrapped in scraps of cloth, lying in a feeding trough.

Even when he became a man, Jesus still used stories, parables, simple lessons about God – farming analogies, fishing stories – all are God’s baby talk. He spoke about a place where children are the most prized citizens and those who know God best.

When Eric and I met the Crowsons at Cooks Night Out recently, they gifted us with a Christmas CD. Some of the songs are original. My favorite has this lyric: “When there is love to be delivered, no one is ever far away. If love can cross the heavens from the stars to Bethlehem, there’s no distance that’s too great from where you are to where I am.” And in another song, “Let my heart be a manger; where pure love abides.”

“Round Christmastime; A Crowson Family & Friends Christmas”. 2010.

Ann Weems wrote a poem about the Incarnation of God entitled “Angels Still Appear”

Angels still appear to those
Ready to receive blessings
In spite of the barren
Impossibility of their lives.

Blessings still come
To those who believe
That nothing is impossible
In the hand of God

Mary still gives birth,
Not just every Advent,
Mary still gives birth
Each day to this Child
Who advents into hearts,
Unexpectedly and forever.

Herods still live who

Would kill this Child,
But Mary and Joseph
Still flee into the desert,
And the night,
To protect the One
Given into their keeping.

Doors still slam in the
Inns of this world
Herods still plot to kill,
Deserts and darkness
Still threaten our safety
But God still lives.
In spite of war and terror,
Mary gives birth
To the Prince of Peace.
In spite of hearts
Pregnant with hatred,
Mary gives birth to LOVE.

It is not done!
The birthing is not over.
The blessings continue.
Angels wait in the wings!

"From Advent's Alleluia to Easter's Morning Light" Ann Weems