

Caution: Baby On Board

Isaiah 9:2-7, Luke 2:1-20

December 24, 2005

Barbara Wheeler, President of Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City, tells about flying from New York to Pasadena in December to make a speech at Fuller Seminary. Barbara spent three valuable upgrade coupons to secure a first-class seat so she could work on her speech during the flight. As take-off time neared, she was pleased that no one was sitting in the seat beside her—more room for her papers, briefcase, and laptop. But just as she was organizing her work, at the very last minute, before the doors closed, the seat was taken by a woman with a baby, “small enough to be carried in her lap, big enough to resist being restrained.”

We’ve all been there: your heart sinks and you prepare for the worst, which, in this case, is exactly what happened. The baby batted Barbara’s computer and grabbed her papers. When Barbara put away her materials in frustration, the baby kicked and screamed. Other passengers, trying to work, glared. Barbara gave the flight attendant an imploring look. The flight attendant banished the child and his mother, who was embarrassed and furious at everybody, to an empty seat in coach. “We all went happily back to work,” Barbara says, “they no doubt on topics related to mammon, I to writing about God.”

Upon arriving in Pasadena, the meeting began with a brief sermon by the seminary president. It was Christmastime and he read the familiar story in Luke 2. He talked about everyone’s favorite carol, “Away in a Manger,” which is attributed to Martin Luther. “A great hymn,” he said, “but one line is just wrong: ‘Little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.’ No, it’s not so. He cried. He cried for us. He died for us.”

Barbara, the airline passenger, said she was cut to the quick, felt terrible all weekend, and knew that the Holy Spirit had arranged for her to be rebuked for her self-importance and intolerance.¹

“No crying he makes.” Have you ever known a baby who doesn’t cry at least sometimes? Granted, some are mellower than others, but crying is their primary mode of communication for the first few months of life. It’s the way that they tell us that something is wrong. Then it becomes a guessing game to figure out what’s wrong, because all cries tend to sound alike. Is it hungry? Is it tired? Is it frightened? Is a diaper dirty? Is it sick? Babies cry; they need to cry to get our attention.

Although we like to romanticize Jesus as a perfect, cuddly, happy, joyous, problem-free infant, he wasn’t. And that’s exactly the message of

Christmas. God is one of us, born of a woman as a human baby; born not as royalty, but as a peasant; born not to be above us or beyond us, but born to be with us. Borrowing from the prophet Isaiah, he is called, Emmanuel, meaning “God with us.” In John’s poetic language, Jesus is the “Word made flesh.” In theological terms we call it the Incarnation, an intellectually challenging, yet soul-stirring and heart-warming notion. God is with us in our birthing. God is with us in our living. God is with us in our crying. God is even with us in our dying, for in Jesus, God has experienced it all, the joys and sorrows, the agonies and ecstasies of our human existence.

The sign that is given the shepherds on the night of Jesus’ birth is a baby wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. The baby is a sign of good news of great joy for all the people; the baby is a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. God chooses to work through what seems weak, vulnerable, and ordinary to communicate with us. God chooses to identify with us in our everyday lives, entering our human experience to change it from the inside out. God meets us in the real world, in the earthiness and ordinariness of our embodied lives. God embraces our human condition from within it, not from above it, not by denying or minimizing it.

God comes as a baby to get our attention. God is with us, because God is in love with us. We humans have a hard time believing in God, let alone believing God loves us. We want to be independent, self-sufficient. We pretend to have no needs that we can’t satisfy ourselves.

But if we are honest, there are moments when we are frightened, when we are lonely, when we aren’t sure where to turn. Jesus has been there, fearful of those who were out to kill him and abandoned by his closest friends in his darkest moment. Jesus found his guidance and strength in deep communion with God, stealing time away from his followers for prayerful solitude. There in the silence he was reminded of a presence, that he was not alone. His spirit was empowered by God for the next steps in his mission.

Sometimes it is not until we are in the depths, weary and worn, empty and powerless, that we feel something stirring deep within. We sense a flicker of hope that is still burning. That faint glimmer, the nearly imperceptible movement is God with us. Tapping into that presence we find renewed strength to tackle the obstacles before us.

During the darkest hours of World War II in England, a gloom swept over the nation as the Luftwaffe dropped tons and tons of bombs on London. There was a legitimate fear felt for the safety of the King, George VI, and his family. His staff, therefore, made secret arrangements to transport the king and his family to safety in Canada, for the duration of the

war. Despite the urgings of his advisors, George refused to leave his country in its darkest hour. Shortly thereafter an incident was reported in a London newspaper in which the king was inspecting a bombed out section of London after an air raid. While walking through the rubble, an elderly man walked up to King George and said, "You, here, in the midst of this. You are indeed a good King!"

We may not understand the mystery that surrounds the Christmas story but we do know that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. God is with us in the ugly part of our lives as well as the good. God does not desert us in the darkest hour of our despair. God is there in the debris of our broken dreams and the ruin of our tangled lives. Our heavenly King has come into the rubble of our lives to give help and support, to be a holy, healing presence.²

My friends, we rejoice in the gift of Christmas, a baby, a crying, laughing baby, one of us, God with us, Jesus Christ who rejoices with us and weeps with us. Because baby Jesus is onboard, we know that we are not alone; God is always with us.

Holy God, we pause with awe and wonder this holy night. If you had only given us the gift of life, that would have been enough. But you have gone far beyond giving us life. You have given us Yourself. You are present to share in the gift of life. Your presence with us is a joyous gift.

We remember those who were the first to meet Jesus and receive him into their lives, his parents, Mary and Joseph, his relatives, the shepherds and magi. We are grateful for their insight to recognize your presence in Jesus' teachings and healings, in his lifestyle and relationships. We are thankful for those who have shared the stories of his life and ministry over the ages, that we too, through Jesus, might come to know you in a deep and meaningful way.

We pry open our hearts this holy night, O God. Some of us await with excitement. Others of us are reluctant and wary. You know, O God, those parts of our lives that are broken, the rubble through which we walk, the uncertainty we feel about the future. Come, Lord Jesus, come, be born in the midst of our lowly lives, descend into the rubble to show us a way through. Come into the sorrow and weep with us until our mourning turns to dancing. Come, be born in us anew, Baby Jesus.

Come, crying to get our attention, and teach us to set our world aright. Bring your spirit of peace, that we might bring an end to warfare and violence. Spread your spirit of solidarity among us, that all might have food, housing, health care and education available. Infuse us with

understanding, so that we might work together with cooperation toward the welfare of all your people.

As Jesus embodied the fullness of God, may we be filled with the fullness of Jesus. Be born anew in us and fill us with your presence, power, and peace. Amen.

¹ Rev. John Buchanan, *No Crying He Makes?*, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, December 19, 2004, www.fourthchurch.org

²Lectionary Homiletics, December 2005, p. 27.

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