

First Sunday after Christmas: John 1
Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. W. Terry Miller
December 29, 2024

Beyond the Baby

In the rather tacky, slapstick comedy movie *Talladega Nights*, comedian Will Ferrell plays a NASCAR driver named Ricky Bobby. There is a scene where Ricky Bobby is saying the blessing at the family dinner table. He starts the prayer with the invocation, "Dear Lord Baby Jesus." And after he has given thanks for all the fast food on the table and offered thanks for everyone gathered there, he continues, "Dear Lord Baby Jesus, we also thank you for my wife's father, Chip. We hope you can use your Baby-Jesus powers to heal him and his horrible leg." Ricky Bobby is about to give another intercession, "Dear 8lb, 6oz, newborn, infant Jesus, don't even know a word yet, just a little infant and cuddly, but still omnipotent," when his wife gently reminds him that baby Jesus did grow up. "Well, look," Ricky Bobby shoots back, "I like the Christmas-Jesus best, and *I'm* saying grace. When *you* say grace, you can say it to grownup Jesus, or teenaged Jesus, or bearded Jesus, or whoever you want." So Ricky Bobby continues his prayer, "Dear Tiny Jesus, in your golden fleece diapers with your tiny little balled up fist..."

We may not be as crass as Ricky Bobby, but it seems safe to say that our culture agrees with his theology. Our culture likes the Christmas-Jesus best. We love the image of sweet baby Jesus. What is more approachable, more universally appealing than a defenseless and innocent newborn baby? And that's all right to a point, I suppose. But, because we are so accustomed to schmaltzy pictures of the babe in the manger, we may not appreciate the change that this baby wrought in how we humans know and approach God.

You see, in most religious traditions, *fear* is the primary emotion when one approaches the divine. Ancient peoples sacrificed food, livestock and even humans to placate angry gods. Hindus present offerings at the temple to their deities. Kneeling Muslims bow down in reverence so low that their foreheads touch to the ground. The Jewish tradition too associated fear with worship. Thinking of such stories as the burning bush of Moses, the burning coal of Isaiah, the otherworldly visions of Ezekiel, it seems a person "blessed" with a direct encounter with God could expect to come away scorched or glowing or maybe half-crippled like Jacob after wrestling with the angel. And these were the fortunate ones: Jewish children also learned stories of Mount Sinai, where Moses received the Commandments, how anyone who touched the mountain would fall over dead. They learned that if you mishandle the Ark of the Covenant, you died. If you entered the Most Holy Place, you'd never come out alive.

In truth, fear never worked very well. The Old Testament includes far more examples of ungodliness than godliness, despite the fear of God. And so a new approach was needed, one that would not emphasize the vast gulf between God and humanity but instead would span it. In the incarnation, the enfleshment of God, in the man Jesus of Nazareth, God found a way of relating to human beings that did not involve fear.

In his book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, author Philip Yancey tells how he learned about the Incarnation when he kept a salt-water aquarium. Management of a marine aquarium, he quickly discovered, is no easy task. He had to run a portable chemical laboratory to monitor the nitrate levels and the ammonia content. He pumped in vitamins and antibiotics and sulphur drugs and enough enzymes to make a rock grow. He filtered the water through glass fibers and charcoal, and exposed it to ultraviolet light.

Yancey then muses, that you would think in view of all the energy he expended on their behalf, that the fish would at least be grateful. But that was certainly not the case. Every time Yancey's shadow loomed above the tank they dove for cover into the nearest shell. They showed him one emotion and one emotion only: *fear*. Even though he opened the lid and dropped in food on a regular schedule, three times a day, they responded to each visit as a sure sign of his designs to torture them. Yancey found that nothing he could do could convince them of his true intentions.

To his fish Yancey was God. He was too large for them, his actions too incomprehensible. His acts of mercy they saw as cruelty; his attempts at healing they viewed as destruction. The only way to change their perceptions, Yancey realized, would be for him to become a fish and 'speak' to them in a language they could understand.

And that was what God did in the Incarnation, when he sent his Son, the Word of God, to become human, to take on flesh, to become one of us. Of course, a human being becoming a fish is nothing compared to God becoming human. The God of the universe, who created matter, took shape within it, as an artist might become a spot on a painting or a storyteller a character in his own story. Now, instead of speaking to us from the outside, so to speak, God now could speak to us as one of us. Fear need no longer dictate how we relate to God. Now we are able to communicate with God freely as if we were speaking with a fellow human being.

Only the point of this new openness is not simply to allow us to shoot the breeze with God, or to discuss religion with him or even to dialog about higher truths. No, God doesn't just want to share a conversation with us; he wants to share himself with us, to reveal himself to us that we might know him and love him and share with him in his very life. God wants us to know life, real life in Him, and so God has made a way for us to share in that life with Him.

This is what I mean. In the Incarnation, God has condescended, come down, humbled himself to take on human flesh. And by that action God has forever changed humanity and all of creation. In the Incarnation, God has hallowed, sanctified, human flesh, by God's own presence. In the Incarnation, the divine and the human, God and man, have become fused, enmeshed, immersed in one another. Humanity and God have been united in Jesus Christ. And, because of this union, we share in Jesus' life and in his glory and in all that Jesus has, for, as John says, "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." The meaning of the Incarnation—of Christmas—is then not simply that God has come down but also that humanity has been raised up, given power to become sons and daughters of God, to know and share in the fullness of God's grace and truth and light.

To go back to Yancey's analogy, the point of him becoming a fish is that fish might become human, so that they can converse with us, to share with us in all that being human means, to have

communion with us. The same is true for Jesus becoming human. That is the end goal, the purpose of the Incarnation. God became one of us, that we might become like Him. As St Athanasius put it, “God became man that man might become divine.” That is what this is all about, what Christianity is all about. God united himself with us, in our humanity by becoming human, so that he might raise us up to where he is, to divinity.

The author CS Lewis for his part suggests that the Incarnation can be described as Heaven drawing Earth up into it. When God became human in Jesus, he took on with his human body the whole environment of nature—locality, limitation, sleep, sweat, aching feet, frustration, pain, doubt and death. He took on all of that, took it into him, took it up. The effect was that, by not just creating us, but also *becoming* one of us, Christ ennobled and raised up all of humanity.

Lewis goes on to suggest the image of a diver plunging into a deep pool of water to retrieve a lost precious object. As he goes deeper, the water changes from “warm and sunlit” to “pitch black” and “freezing.” Then, his “lungs almost bursting,” he goes down into the “mud and slime” before finally heading back to the surface, triumphantly bearing the lost object. And what is this lost yet precious object, that merited this dangerous and difficult descent? It is “human nature,” Lewis explains, God “descended into his own universe, and rose again, bringing human nature up with him.”

For Lewis, the doctrine of the incarnation shows us that God dived down into “the bottom of creation,” and came up again, bearing the “whole redeemed nature on His shoulders.” The exertion, even danger, faced by the diver is a mark of the value of what has fallen down through the deep water into the mud. Lewis invites us to think of a diving God, who plunges into a dark and distant world, to bring us home to where we really belong, and where we really matter.

Christmas is thus about more than the birth of Baby Jesus. In saying “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” it means God and humanity have been united. God has come to share with us in our life, and we are invited to share in God’s life. Christmas is then about the birth of a new reality, a new hope, a new people. A people enlightened by the light of Christ and sharing in the very life of God. We are that people, and we rejoice that God is born a child, and through him is birthed a new life for us with God. Thanks be to God. Amen.