

WHAT CHILD IS THIS?

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Luke 2:21-33

The thing I appreciate the most about the text we heard today, is how mundane it is. We hear about the day-to-day doings of Joseph and Mary as they handle the business that follows from having a baby: circumcision and temple offering. It is total banality, punctuated by the occasional prophet who leaps up to declare that Jesus is the Messiah, and this seems to amaze Mary and Joseph. They are just trying to parent their newborn - imagine how this news must seem!

One thing that is noticeably missing from this text, and from our Bible, is information on the temperament of the baby Jesus. We are left largely to our own ideas when it comes to imagining what the baby Jesus is like.

So - what kind of baby Jesus do you believe in?

What does he look like? What would he sound like? How would he act?

We have a pretty strong cultural mythology when it comes to the baby Jesus. Baby Jesus is often thought to be extremely well-behaved, very sweet, a totally ideal baby in every way. The hymn writers from the last couple hundred years have decidedly reinforced this mythology. They gave verse to a baby Jesus who is always meek and mild. A perfect little cherub of a baby: cooing sweetly, looking up from his manger with big, cute baby Jesus eyes - 'then, he smiled at me, par-um-pum-pum-pum!', and you'd better believe that 'no crying he makes!' The carol writers evidently envisioned a baby Jesus who is unlike any other baby ever born in the history of humanity.

Jesus, the super-baby! His body may be human, but his temperament is all God, as if God is only meek and mild.

Mary and Joseph, bless their hearts, would probably tell us very differently. It reminds me of those kids who put on a very well-behaved face when company's over, but when it's just Mom and Dad, look out. "Don't let Jesus fool you; you should see how he behaves when it's just the three of us."

We have tended to mythologize the baby Jesus in ways that

reflect our cultural norms. We seem to believe that the best kind of baby is one who is mild, cute, fun, soft, gentle, who smells only nice, and who, of course, sleeps through the night. A good baby is not supposed to make a scene, or smell bad, or be colicky, or anything like that. Whatever our ideas about an ideal baby may be, we transfer over to God, because obviously, God would be the most ideal baby of all, right? I wonder whether this mythology around the ideal baby Jesus is of any use to parents in the real world. If Jesus was a perfect baby, and we're only supposed to feel tender and loving things toward a perfect baby, what about when your baby is not perfect, not well-behaved, and is difficult to love?

We idealize the Baby Jesus, and we idealize the adult Jesus as well. For example, just as our culture has pacified the baby Jesus, we have completely muted the anger of the adult Jesus. But the adult Jesus was certainly no mild-mannered goody-two-shoes. The notion of a quiet, blissful Jesus is not to be found in the Bible. But it is good for our cultural mythology, in which people aren't supposed to make a scene, or disrupt the status quo, or be noisy, or be different.

But our idealization of Jesus comes at a high cost: that is, the separation of God from our real human experience. By idealizing everything about Jesus' humanity, we are essentially saying that God does not know what it is to be a regular human being. We are denying a central aspect of Jesus' humanity if we deny him the use of a real human body: one that gets stressed out, one that has limitations, one that doesn't put on a happy face all the time. In my view, I don't think it is possible for God to be fully human if we adhere to an idealized notion about the body and behavior of Jesus. And if God isn't fully human, or if God is only an ideal human, then that means that God can't fully relate to the parts of human experience that our society considers to be ungodly.

We have also idealized the adult Jesus when it comes to what we assume about his sexuality. Believers have been squeamish about sex since the days before Christ, and I'll bet I'm not the only one in here who is a little squeamish as well.

In the roughly two thousand years since the days of Christ,

Christians have largely assumed that God is very anti-sex. The Bible appears to be full of disapproval when it comes to sex. Matthew and Luke declare that Mary was a virgin, and while the same claim is not made about Jesus, most Christians have assumed he was too. We have largely equated sex with sin, and so if Jesus is to be sinless, then quite obviously, he wouldn't have been having any unauthorized sex. And so, we have kept Jesus away from human sexual experience, and in so doing, we are able to keep God away from human sexual experience. This creates a separation, one which, in my view, has resulted in a world of suffering. We do not allow God anywhere near human sexuality, and so at best, we see God as simply absent from the picture, while at worst, we worry that God is severely opposed to [you fill in the blank]. I firmly believe that this separation is the root of much repression, resulting in sin, shame, brokenness, and abuse when it comes to sexuality.

This is only one example, but there seem to be other ways that we idealize Jesus, denying his humanity, and in so doing, separate ourselves further from God.

Consider the meek and mild baby Jesus. If Jesus, and thus God, is supposed to be meek and mild, then that distances God from the human experience of righteous anger in the face of injustice. If Jesus is supposed to be cute and clean and blond and white, then we distance God from the human experience of meeting Jesus among those who are brown, or those who are not clean, or those who are not cute.

One way we can stop distancing ourselves from God is to embrace God's raw, visceral humanity, in the real, human person of Jesus Christ. God really knows and really understands what it is to be human. And, God knows and understands what it is to be God. We can take all of the shame, suffering, pain, and sin on our hearts to God, and trust doesn't just sympathize from afar, but empathizes in the flesh. We can trust God, because God knows us deeply, and loves us enough to compel us to better living. Not by threat, not by force, but by call, and love. And that is a true Christmas miracle.