

God's Human Face¹

A choir member told me a while back that she had a startling experience while the choir was sight-reading their first run through Buddy Greene and Mark Lowry's "Mary Did You Know." You know this song. "Mary did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water..." and so on. Anyway, the choir got to the line, "And when you kiss your little baby, you've kissed the face of God," the choir member almost fainted. She'd never thought of it quite that starkly. She didn't see that coming. The whole Christmas miracle in one line. Jesus, even baby Jesus, is God in the world.

The central truth of Christmas, a truth that grabs us and surprises us again and again is that God, technically, the second person of the Trinity, came down from his high position reigning with the Father and became human. The amazing thing is he never ceased being God. Jesus is both God—minus the perks and power of God. And God is Jesus—a person. We're not kidding about the God-become a person part. Really, a person. The person part starts in Mary's womb. Jesus was a fetus, then a newborn. Christmas focuses on this early stage, which is kind of attractive. Everyone loves babies.

Now, if we stop with the birth we're going to miss some of the meat. Take another Christmas carol, "Once In Royal David's

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City." That hymn has always been a children's song. But it gets incorporated into big adult Christmas lessons and carols services and orchestral renditions because it makes so explicit just how human Jesus is.

*Jesus is our childhood pattern
Day by day, like us he grew.
He was little, weak, and helpless.
Tears and smiles, like us, he knew.
And he feels for all our sadness
And he shares in all our gladness.*

Where I'm going with this is that it is a tad unsettling how much a person God became in Jesus. In fact, the hard part in understanding the nature of Jesus Christ has generally been grasping his full humanity, rather than his full divinity.

You see, Jesus' humanity goes deeper still. Jesus lived a common life. No advanced degree in theology. No published books. No travel. No political office. Truth be told, I enjoy more perks and niceties than did the Lord whom I serve.

It goes deeper. Jesus died a horrible death. It was a horrible death that included the abandonment of friends, the rejection of the religious community, the scorn of passers by, the shame of death in public.

I'm always struck when I visit a prison or county jail how much inmates respect and recognize Jesus. I've led singing among incarcerated men. You should hear them sing the popular

song, "Put your hand in the hand of the man who stilled the waters." You can hear in their voices what desperate people have long sensed. They know Jesus as one who is one of them. They look to him as one whom they can trust and respect.

Finally, God as human went to Hell. Now, there are lots of ways to interpret this detail. Here's one that I find compelling. Hell is total isolation from God and everyone. Hell is living in such a way so as to push everyone away. God included. I once heard of a man who was so depressed that he'd go home from work, drink too many beers, and if anyone approached him he'd say, "I just want to be left alone."

Hell is getting that wish. But here's the amazing thing. Even the person in Hell is not abandoned. Jesus Christ enters that condition and stands in solidarity with humanity completely consigned to abandonment and Godlessness.

When God became one of us, he became one with us in all our gritty, sinful, painful, abandoned aspects. Jesus didn't just live on the top of life, with the pretty, privileged people. He lived hard and real. He lived it all.

Why? Why did God really join us? Well, it feels darn good to have someone be interested enough to enter your world. I chaired a presbytery committee years back and one of my committee members was a young farm wife. She would get dressed

up to come to town to enter the presbytery world once a month. I'd always ask her. "How's the farm?" And she'd be delighted to explain. From her I learned some things about what it means to farm nowadays. It truly is a drama and a fascinating existence. There's commodity prices; timing the harvest so the moisture is just right; investing in equipment; switching crops to find a profitable product. She was totally immersed in farming and took delight whenever anyone showed interest. Every year she and her husband held a weekend where visitors could actually work on their farm.

Can you see where I'm going? It feels darn good to have someone interested enough or caring enough to enter your world.

My wife showed me a little diagram once. It was a diagram that taught how to communicate with someone who has Alzheimer's disease. It involves just two stick human figures. To communicate normally with someone, both parties typically put forth approximately equal amounts of energy to speak and listen. This is represented by arrows of equal lengths from each figure extending towards each other. With an Alzheimer's patient, the friend's arrow needs to be much longer, signifying the need for the non-impaired person to carry 70%, 80%, 90% of the effort to communicate.

When we consider how God came into the human experience in Jesus, we realize that 100% of the effort to reach us comes from God. The whole being of Jesus is God's sublime reach toward each of us.

Now there's one element of God's human history; God's human experience that I haven't touched upon. Jesus is lifted up and carried back into the Father's arms in the Resurrection. If being born, growing up, living a common life, suffering cruelty and dying in great pain, even being consigned to the forsakenness of a sinner, is how Jesus shares human existence, can't we reason that being brought back to life, and lifted into God's presence, is also a human experience. In the resurrection Jesus enters into that part of human experience that we haven't had yet, but that we will have, because we've shared every other experience with Jesus. Don't we see in the resurrection our own ultimate fate, given the fact that everything else Jesus did was what we already experience as human beings.

A wise person observed that God never follows a great work with a lesser work. Everything God does is greater than what he has done before. If that's true, then the coming of Jesus into this human experience is greater than the previous works of God including even the creation of the Universe! Imagine that. The

coming of God into our world is somehow wiser, more loving, more subtle, more significant than the creation of the Universe.

That certainly puts into perspective the temporary downturn in the financial markets which we are dealing with this Christmas. The fact that we may be spending a bit less or changing work is nothing next to the fact that Jesus utterly shares our life. That no human experience is so demeaning that God wants nothing to do with it.

Christmas means, bluntly, that we are loved. We're loved and we're never alone. And held in a love that embraces all of our being, we are able to love in a new way ourselves.