

A Healthy Cry from the Manger

I suspect that Martin Luther, who supposedly wrote "Away in a Manger," had no children of his own. These words are a dead giveaway:

The cattle are lowing, the Baby awakes,
But little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes.

Real newborns cry. Real newborns mess their diapers. Real newborns wail at the top of their lungs. That's why God created parents.

If we're going to understand what happened in Bethlehem, we must believe that this baby—like any other baby, when he awakes, howls! At least he sobs a little, because that's what Christmas means at its very core. Let me explain.

When I was a boy I grew up on a diet of Superman comics. You know the story. A baby born on the disintegrating planet Krypton is sent by his parents in a space capsule to earth. The boy grows up to be Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for the Daily Planet. And no one can tell that Clark Kent is really Superman—until you get him around a phone booth.

Superman: faster than a speeding bullet; more powerful than a locomotive; able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. Superman. Superhuman. He just *looks* like a man.

Then there's "Star Trek": the original, "The Next Generation", "Deep Space 9", Voyager, Enterprise and discovery—and six (or is it seven?) movies. A frequently recurring theme in "Star Trek" has some alien being masquerade as a human, and appearing on the "Enterprise" with the evil intent of taking over. Q is a frequent one, and my favorite. He looks like a human, but don't be fooled. He's really not. He has superhuman, telepathic powers; he's psychokinetic, which means he can move things around and turn machines on and off and reprogram computers, just by use of his mental powers. Humans are basically helpless. It's a frightening thought.

There are those who would put Jesus—the babe of Bethlehem—in the same category as superman, or Q: superhuman. In the early church, some heretics claimed Jesus just pretended to be human. They said Spirit (good) and flesh (bad) could never mix. They said Jesus couldn't have been human, because humans die; and God can't die. John jumped on that with both feet: In his Gospel he wrote, clear as a bell: "*The word became flesh, and pitched tent among us*" (JOHN 1:14).

It's important for us to understand that what happened in the stable in Bethlehem was not pretend. God REALLY took on humanness and became human. For a time—for the span of one lifetime of one man—Christ, who was equal with God, voluntarily gave up His divinity, and became human.

And it's important for us to know how he did that. Paul puts it this way:

(PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11 NRSV) *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,*
⁶ *who, though he was in the form of God,*
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷ *but emptied himself,*
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸ *he humbled himself*
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
⁹ *Therefore God also highly exalted him*
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
¹⁰ *so that at the name of Jesus*
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ *and every tongue should confess*
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

The first key for us is in verse 7: “He ‘emptied’ himself”. In the original language that phrase is one word. Its primary meaning is “to submit.” The NIV says, (He) made himself nothing...” John’s gospel uses the same word when Jesus says, “*I am the good shepherd. . . . I lay down my life for the sheep.*” (JOHN 10:15) The crucial thing to understand is that *it’s a voluntary act.*

The second key is also in verse 7: “...*taking on the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.*” The *Living Bible* says he “took on the ‘disguise’ of a servant, being made in human likeness.” The word is not—cannot be—“disguise.”

In the original language the word is “μορφή;” the word from which we get the English word, “metamorphosis.” Metamorphosis is the living process in which a caterpillar crawls out on a limb and spins a cocoon, and BECOMES a butterfly—the caterpillar doesn’t take on the disguise of a butterfly. It “takes on the form”—*the essence changes.*

And why is that important? As long as the Christ remains some superhuman, heavenly alien—as long as his feet don’t touch the ground, then we have a convenient excuse: “Well, he’s the Son of God! I’m ‘only’ human.” And that puts us in the same category as the heretics we mentioned earlier.

This is not a question of Christ’s divinity. Most people of faith believe in the divinity of Christ. It’s when we talk about a human Christ that some may have problems. You see, if Christ is human—if Christ “empties himself” of divinity, and “takes on the ‘form’ of a servant”—if his feet really touch the ground, he’ll leave footprints, and he calls us to “follow.”

Then we can never again say, "I'm 'only' human. Christ was human; and we'll have to take seriously his words at the Last Supper: "*I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do all these things I have done. He will do even greater things than these...*" (JOHN 14:12 JRV) —AS HUMANS—

Maybe, even as we grow toward "*the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ*" (EPHESIANS 4:13 KJV), maybe it's more accurate to say I'm not yet fully human.

It's important to know why God did this. If Jesus didn't live as a real human, filled with the Holy Spirit, what makes us think that we—we who are really human—what makes us think we can receive power to live for God in this world? If Christ is not human, there is no precedent.

There's a galaxy of difference between Spock lifting his hand in the Vulcan greeting, "Live long and prosper," and Jesus lifting his nail-scared hands to bless his disciples. When Spock says, "Human emotions make no sense whatsoever," I chuckle. After all, those pointy ears are a dead giveaway. How could he understand? He's not human, after all. He's 'only' Vulcan.

But, when Jesus says, "I understand your tears; I understand your pain; I understand your weaknesses and your temptations," we can believe it, and worship. In Jesus, God is saying, "I know how you feel, because I've been there."

So, it doesn't bother me a bit to hear a good healthy scream coming from the manger, breaking the eerie stillness of that first Christmas morning. After all, a newborn baby with healthy lungs is a very good sign.