

Baby? What Baby?

Luke 2:41-52 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26 Colossians 3:12-17
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Ann LaMar
December 27, 2015

Have you watched children grow up so fast it seemed like only yesterday when they were babies?

If you have, then you know what's going on in this story. If you haven't, now's your chance. Only two days ago we read in the gospel we call Luke how the Baby Jesus was born in a manger. Twenty-one verses later (not even a whole chapter) we find him 12 years old talking with the elders in the Temple. It's enough to make you ask, "Baby? What baby? We saw a baby here must a minute ago!"

Pastor Todd thoughtfully guided us through Advent, with the help of some friends, probing the birth of Jesus as told, or not told, through the four gospels. I want to take us back to the earliest Christian writings, before the gospels, as taught by my Systematic Theology professor in seminary, whose name I long ago forgot.

This is what she told us. Paul, the Paul of *Road to Damascus* fame, wrote the first accounts we have about Jesus: "Christ, and him crucified." If Paul knew of any birth narratives, he did not write them down. He did acknowledge, however, in his letter to the Galatians, that "when the fullness of time had come, God sent his son, born of a woman . . ." End of story – end of BIRTH story, at least, but beginning of the new life in Christ story. Paul did not date his letters, so no one can say for certain when he wrote to the Galatians, but scholars widely believe it was in the mid-to-late 50s. And if Jesus died and was resurrected between 30 and 35 CE, then only bits and pieces of stories about his life in the intervening 10 to 20 years floated around. So, for Paul, Jesus became the Christ, the savior, the Son of God at his resurrection. Baby? What baby?

Time passed; those who followed Jesus continued discussing who he was, and came to the conclusion that, if Jesus became the Christ at his resurrection, then he must have been the Christ at his baptism. So, around the year 70 CE (20 years after Paul wrote; 40 years after God raised Jesus) Mark felt compelled to write his story, and he began with Jesus' baptism. He wrote "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness . . . and Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." That's it! By the end of the 9th verse of the first chapter, we know everything Mark thinks we need to know about the beginning of Jesus' life. Baby? What baby?

About the same time, Roman soldiers destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, which created a crisis in the Jewish community. The Children of Israel had no place to worship, no place to offer their required sacrifices. To those Jews who followed Jesus, the Pharisees said "You can't be both. You're either in or you're out. Make your decision." Some remained Jews; some left to become Christian. The one who wrote the gospel we call Matthew probably wrote his account to those Jews who believed Jesus was the Messiah. And he began his story with a genealogy starting with Father Abraham, coming down through the generations, through Isaac and Jacob and King David. Matthew told about astrologers coming from the east to visit "this child who has been born King of the Jews." They had seen his star, and not having any speedy means of transportation, they didn't reach Jesus' house until he was at least two years old. To the author of Matthew, if Jesus became the Messiah at his baptism, then he must have been the Messiah from the time he was a little boy. Baby? What baby?

More time passed. Maybe 10 years later, in 80 CE plus or minus, a man very likely named Luke felt inspired to write to those who followed Jesus but did not have a Jewish heritage. These were the gentiles, the "untouchables." Baby? There's the baby, born to an unlikely mother from a family fraught with scandal. And his ancestors? Luke went way beyond David and Jacob and Isaac and Abraham! For Luke, Jesus was the son of Adam, the son of God.

But the story-telling wasn't over! Uncertainty about who Jesus was and how he came to be continued to trouble the early Christian community. This conundrum resulted in at least one more gospel called John, believed to have been written about the year 90 of the Common Era. And how does it begin? "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God . . . and the word became flesh and lived among us." For John, if Jesus became the Son of God at his birth, then he must have been the Son of God from the very beginning of time. And so this time of year, every year we celebrate!

Dr. David Taylor, assistant professor of theology and culture in California, wrote an article about America's celebration that appeared in *The Washington Post* on Christmas Eve. He says

Christmas in America, as a phenomenon of civic religion, has regrettably allowed the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke to become all-too familiar and functionally innocuous. The story of Jesus has no bite. A tame "baby Jesus" makes his annual, heart-warming appearance, and leaves us largely un-bothered and un-changed.

If David Taylor had read Ann Weems' book entitled *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, he might feel some hope. This is what she wrote about "The Cross in the Manger."

“The Cross in the Manger”

by Ann Weems, from *Kneeling in Bethlehem*

*If there is no cross in the manger,
there is no Christmas.*

*If the Babe doesn't become the Adult,
there is no Bethlehem star.*

*If there is no commitment in us,
there are no Wise Men searching.*

*If we offer no cup of cold water,
there is no gold, no frankincense, no myrrh.*

*If there is no praising God's name,
there are no angels singing.*

*If there is no spirit of alleluia,
there are no shepherds watching.*

*If there is no standing up, no speaking out, no risk,
there is no Herod, no flight into Egypt.*

*If there is no room in our inn,
then "Merry Christmas" mocks the Christ Child,
and the Holy Family is just a holiday card,
and God will loathe our feasts and festivals.*

*If there is no forgiveness in us,
there is no cause for celebration.*

*If Christmas is not now,
if Christ is not born into the everyday present,
then what is all the noise about?*

Powerful words she wrote, don't you think? Neither Paul nor the gospel writers agree on the beginning of the story of Jesus' life. But they ALL write about Christ, and him crucified -- the cross in the manger. Where's the baby? The baby grew up! And he lives in us, whatever our age.

Baby? What baby?