

“THE NEEDS OF GOD”

Luke 2:1-20

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Forty years ago, J. B. Phillips wrote a book called *Your God is too Small: A Guide for Believers and Skeptics Alike*. I may have read it, but if I did, I don't remember any of the details. I suspect most people know the book only by the title, but use it as an argument against people who doubt the efficacy of prayer or people who despair over some state of the world. I don't know whether either of these things was on Phillips' agenda, but if others can make a comment solely based on the title of a book, I figured I could too. Please note that my comment has no bearing whatsoever on the content of his book, but the title suggested to me that whatever God is, God chooses to be small at Christmas.

I mean this quite literally. Despite the preferred image among Renaissance painters to depict a chubby, largish baby, I think it just as likely that the “tiny, little baby” of our Christmas music is more accurate. I'm not suggesting that the project of the incarnation, the Word made flesh, Emmanuel or any other theological ideas we associate with the infant Jesus are little things. They are in fact big ideas. But I want to ponder this evening the idea that God chooses to enter the world through the small form of an infant. Paul writes to the church at Philippi: “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself [became small we might say], ... assuming human likeness... he humbled himself...” (Phil. 2:5-8).

So God becomes small and enters the world through Mary's womb, and names her baby, Jesus. The author of all life enters the world as one life in the same way that every other human being comes into the world, as one small life. This is a big idea, but if we're going to understand it, we've got to ponder the tiny little baby.

When we ponder the baby, we discover some surprising truths. All babies are vulnerable and dependent. Born to a poor woman in a stable or guest room as scholars suggest, this child is particularly at risk. Whatever we may think about God, the story tells us that God chooses to be vulnerable, chooses to depend on human assistance in order to sustain life. Is it saying too much to suggest that God needs to be near us? Is this shrinking God down to our size?

The Hebrew Scriptures describe God as jealous in the Ten Commandments. The prophets describe God as hurt by the failure of the people to be faithful. Isaiah describes God as a suffering servant. Hosea, as we read on Sunday, describes God as a tender mother. There are other ways to know God as larger than life, mountain views, ocean storms, canyon vistas; but the God we know through Jesus and the scriptures is smaller, closer to us.

Theologians call these things “anthropomorphisms.” But when I look at the infant in the manger, am I just making a category mistake, when I suggest that the tiny little baby reveals a God who needs us? Is it so heretical to claim that the creator of the universe shares some of the characteristics of human beings? In fact the success of the grand idea of incarnation depends on people sharing in common with God qualities, purpose and vision.

I am sometimes weary of theologians who make faith into something unnecessarily complicated. In the birth of Jesus, we see a God who becomes small, so that people might reach for their full human potential as children of God.

Look into the manger, and then look up and see Mary. God needed her not only to come into the world, but to clothe, feed, and nurture the child through adolescence and into adulthood. Move your eyes to the right in most nativity scenes and see Joseph, whom God needed to be the kind of presence to Jesus that modeled protection, gave access to the teachings of the faith, and sustained a living that supported the family. There must have been many things that Mary and Joseph did that nudged Jesus toward the kind of person that he eventually became.

Widen your vision and see the shepherds *for whom* God entered the world. See the shepherds whose cries God must have heard, whose distress must have moved God with compassion. Perhaps you see the animals whom Luke neglects to mention, reminding us that God’s love extends beyond the human world to the flora and fauna of the earth, even to the earth itself. Follow the shepherds back to their fields, whose praise is inspired by their own look into the manger. Follow them back to the field where they first heard the news from God’s messengers, the angels, of a savior’s birth which shall be for all people. When God becomes small in the infant Jesus, we see God’s need for guardians, messengers, workers, visionaries, preachers, nurturers.

Look into the manger and see not only God’s love for you, but God’s need for you. In the infant, God becomes small, so that you might understand how important your role is in the life, the health, and the love of this earth. Look into the manger and see the infant Jesus and know that his entry into the world was the same as yours. His welfare depended on many people, just as your welfare did, just as the next generation depends on you and others like you who hear the call that issues from the child in the manger.

Life with God begins, not in the great vistas of the Grand Canyon or in the awesome vision of the Milky Way, but in the tiny little baby, born in Bethlehem, whose smallness invites you into the largeness of your life. Listen to the call from the manger. God needs you. The world needs your wonder, your praise, your healing and nurturing presence. Amen.