

Letting Baby Jesus Grow Up

Luke 2:22-52

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

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Recently Nathan went to the store to pick up a DVD of the latest Will Farrell comedy. It came with a free bonus DVD, the NASCAR-themed movie *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*. If you don't know Will Farrell, I should probably tell you that he's one of those alumni of Saturday Night Live, the one who played George W to perfection. He is lanky, with curly brown hair, eyes a little too close together, and excels at looking like an idiot. In this film he plays Ricky Bobby, a pit crew member who has to fill in for the race car driver and becomes a big star. Ricky is a simple-minded redneck with a heart of gold, and one of the funniest scenes in the movie has to do with the way he prays.

The family is gathered for a meal. Ricky has his head bowed: "Dear Lord Baby Jesus, or as our brothers to the south call you, Hey-Zeus, we thank you so much for this bountiful harvest of Domino's, KFC, and the always delicious Taco Bell. I just want to take time to say thank you for my family, my two beautiful, beautiful, handsome, striking sons, Walker and Texas Ranger, or T.R. as we call him, and of course, my red-hot smoking wife, Carley who is a stone-cold fox."

The third time in the prayer that Ricky mentions Baby Jesus, his wife looks up and interrupts him.

Carley: Hey, you know, sweetie, Jesus did grow up. You don't always have to call him "baby." It's a bit odd and off-putting to pray to a baby.

Ricky: Well, I like the Christmas Jesus best and I'm saying grace. When you say grace you can say it to grownup Jesus, or teenage Jesus, or bearded Jesus or whoever you want.

Carley: You know what I want? I want you to do this grace good so that God will let us win tomorrow.

Ricky: Dear tiny Jesus, in your golden-fleece diapers, with your tiny, little, fat, balled-up fists....

(Then the father-in-law breaks in.) **Chip:** He was a man! He had a beard!

Ricky: Look, I like the baby version the best, do you hear me?

Others around the table begin to tell which version of Jesus they like best—all outrageous—but Ricky gets to finish saying grace:

Ricky: Dear 8 pound, 6 ounce newborn infant Jesus, don't even know a word yet, just a little infant and so cuddly, but still omnipotent, we just thank you for all the races I've won and the 21.2 million dollars – woo! (the rest of the family says "woo" too)... Thank you for all your power and your grace, dear baby God. Amen.

You might think that the writers were just poking fun at Christian faith as something useful only to redneck idiots, but I think they were on to something a lot deeper and a lot funnier. Their target was the disconnect between American Christianity and the grown-up Jesus. Everybody loves the baby Jesus, but no one pays attention to the one who taught us to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow him. We want a Jesus who helps us win and gives us money, but remains small and cuddly, making no demands.

In this post-Christmas season, it's worth asking ourselves whether we are ready to let Jesus grow up. Even in the gospel of Luke the question seems to lie just under the surface. After the Christmas story is over, Jesus is taken to the temple in a dedication ceremony. An old and

spiritual man named Simeon is there, who has been promised that he will not die before seeing the Messiah. Simeon takes baby Jesus in his arms and says, basically, “Lord, now I can die happy.” But then he turns to Mary and says (as *The Message* renders it),

This child marks both the failure and
the recovery of many in Israel,
a figure misunderstood and contradicted—
the pain of a sword-thrust through you—
but the rejection will force honesty,
as God reveals who they really are.

That’s a lot to lay on a baby, or a mother, but it tells you that the baby is not going to remain cuddly.

The same issue of letting Jesus grow up is present in the story of the trip to Jerusalem for Passover when he was 12. Mary and Joseph lose Jesus in the caravan headed back to Galilee—the same way some of us have driven off from McDonald’s without one of the kids. After three frantic days of searching—you can imagine that today there would be Amber alerts and Jesus’ picture on TV and milk cartons—they finally find Jesus in the temple, sitting among adult teachers and asking intelligent questions. Mary is focused on her own anxiety: “Son, how could you have done this to us? What were you thinking? We were freaking out!” Rather than saying, “Oh, I’m sorry, how inconsiderate of me,” Jesus says, “Why were you looking for me? Where else would I be? Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” That is, in my *real* father’s house, the temple of the Lord. Already I am under *God’s* authority, not yours.

Later in Luke’s 8th chapter there is another episode with his mother. Jesus’ mother and brothers come looking for Jesus; Mark’s gospel tells us they wanted to take him home because they thought he was out of his mind. They can’t get near Jesus because of the crowd, so they send a message to him: Your mother and your brothers want to see you. Jesus answers, “My mother and my brothers are whoever hears the word of God and puts it into practice.” So there.

It’s a struggle to let our kids grow up. We can sympathize with Mary. But the question we have to face after Christmas is whether *we* can let Jesus grow up. Do we want to control him, to tame him, to keep him from getting himself in trouble, to defend his reputation? Do we want to be the ones who decide which “version” of Jesus we believe in?

If the weakness of liberal mainline churches is that they are not sure if they really believe in Jesus, the weakness of evangelical churches is that they do not make clear what the content of the word “Jesus” is. All the emphasis is on believing in Jesus and accepting Jesus, but the one and only thing we are told about Jesus is that he died and rose. It is as if Jesus never lived, never taught, never made disciples or commanded us to do the same, never showed us how to live. It’s as if we have nothing to say between Christmas and Good Friday. Is it poor little baby Jesus who gets nailed to the cross and saves us? No. The Jesus who died is the one who taught against religious hypocrisy and exclusion and challenged the establishment. He is the one who taught against violence and hating your enemies and loving money. He’s the one who said to give it all away and trust God rather than the power structures of this world. That’s the one they executed as a threat to their delusional view of reality.

The baby Jesus of Christmas might tell us that God loves us and that he identifies with the poor and lowly. That is a start, but it is not enough to give us life. Jesus himself said that his *words* are life. He taught living under the authority of God in God’s kingdom. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that the difference between the foolish man with his house on the beach and the wise man with his house on a rock was *not* that one heard his teaching and the

other didn't. The fool was the one who heard what Jesus said and did not put it into practice, and when the storm came his house, his whole life, was washed away. The wise man heard the teachings and *did* them, and his house, his life, stood firm.

Sometimes what I hear people saying—between the lines—is “I believe in baby Jesus and I believe in dying-rising Jesus, I'm just not sure about all that stuff he said and did in between.” I think that's exactly why the gospels were written, probably around 70 AD or so—not just because the eyewitnesses were dying off, but also because a Jesus religion was starting to develop that was losing touch with the content of the word “Jesus.” The issue was not whether to worship Jesus, but who exactly was and is this Jesus we worship? Luke, for one, is telling us in his gospel. And part of his message is that Jesus didn't stay a baby. He grew up.

In 1980 a student gave me a copy of a Christmas play which read a little like a *Twilight Zone* episode. He told me his mother wrote it, which I doubt, but I've never been able to find it in print or online. The play was called *Down Will Come Baby*. A typical American wife catches her husband putting something on the Christmas tree secretly: it's a cradle with a baby. She can't understand what he's doing. In walks a drunk neighbor, who notices that they have a cradle in their tree, with a baby—just like the one he and his wife have in their tree.

Oh, he explains, “we get him at Christmas to hang on the Christmas tree.”

Where does he come from?

“He comes; I am never quite sure how, but you know—the stores start in on Christmas the day after Thanksgiving, and then we get carols, and good cheer, and cards. Somewhere along there the baby comes. We look forward to him, and we hang him on the tree until Christmas is over. Sorry to see him go.”

Can't you keep him?

“No, We put him out with the tree... You've seen trees waiting for the garbage man, with silver trimmings and colored paper messed up in the snow. It's too bad in a way.”

But not babies.

“Then you haven't looked. You look—the day after Christmas, they are lying all over the place.”

The drunk explains that you *have* to put the baby out, because if you didn't he would grow up. “You can be pally with a baby and it doesn't mean much.... Everyone likes a baby, especially this one, and a baby likes everyone. That's why we get such a bang out of Christmas. But when he grows up it's different.... His eyes look through us and watch our thinking. His hands stretch out to make us care. His smile gets caught a way with sadness. His lips tell us what we are. Then we'd have to live like real people. That's more than we could bear.”

Ricky Bobby says “I like the Christmas Jesus best.” But the truth is that we don't get to choose our version of Jesus. If you worship a designer Jesus made just for you, you are worshiping a false god. There is one Jesus, whose life and teaching we find in the New Testament. He was a historical person, not a legend we can reshape for every age and every psyche. One of the functions of this table is to keep us anchored to that—that Jesus was real flesh and blood, that on a particular night, the night that he was betrayed, he shared this meal and talked about his death. This meal reminds us that as much as we wish it, he will not remain the cuddly baby Jesus in our arms. He did grow up and die for us—but beyond that he called us to live and die for him.