

“Scripture Doesn’t Hide the Humanity of Jesus, Thank God!”

Luke 2:41-52

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The Da Vinci Code created quite a stir when it first came out both as a novel and as a film. Many church people were offended by its claim that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married and had children, even though it was clearly a work of fiction, a novel, not a historical document, while many critics of the church celebrated its iconoclastic spirit. I confess that I enjoyed the novel as an action-packed mystery and the film as well, largely for its scenery, especially in Scotland.

But the book and film got a number of details wrong. Even Barth Ehrman, who is not known to be an adamant defender of tradition, criticized the inaccuracies, even wrote a book about them while thanking Dan Brown in the process. He told a number of us at a pastors’ conference right after his book came out that before Dan Brown’s novel, when he gave lectures on the early history of the New Testament, a couple dozen people would show up, but after Dan Brown stirred the pot, he spoke to huge crowds and sold lots of books.

So, beyond the entertainment elements, the book and film created a teachable moment, but there were so many errors. “Scholar” Leigh Teabing exaggerates the number of extracanonical Gospels, then says that the canonical Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – cover up Jesus’ humanity to make him more divine, which ostensibly the church wants, while the extracanonical Gospels reveal more of his humanity.

As anyone who has read all of these Gospels knows, the opposite is the case. It is in an extracanonical Gospel – *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* - that the young Jesus explores the use of his power in magical ways, turning clay birds into real birds, raising a child from the dead and killing another child with a curse. That kind of Jesus could come in handy so long as we get to decide who lives and who dies...

But misplaced humor aside, you get the point. It is the extracanonical Jesus who doesn’t seem very human. The canonical Jesus, the biblical Jesus,

does because despite Leigh Teabing's best argument, the church actually has a vested interest in Jesus' humanity and divinity. That's the orthodox teaching, that's what incarnation is about, that's the message of Christmas.

We see it right from the very beginning. We have just read and worshiped around the story. Jesus begins as a flesh-and-blood human baby, born in the usual way, in the roughest setting – an animal shed. There doesn't seem to be much cover-up here. We don't get all the details of spit-ups and diaper changes, but the implications are there.

As a young person, Jesus tests his parents' patience like every other young person. This is today's reading from Luke, we'll consider it in more detail shortly. It points to humanity and divinity, but humanity is there, as any parent will tell you.

As an adult, Jesus has to eat and sleep like any other human being. He knows joy when he teaches and heals. He becomes angry like any another person, especially when he encounters injustice – religious leaders refusing to heal a man with a withered hand because it is the Sabbath, leaders placing burdens on others with added rules, temple authorities allowing the poor to be exploited as they purchase animals for sacrifice. He weeps when his friend Lazarus dies, groans deep within. He feels anxiety as he approaches the cross, even prays in the Garden of Gethsemane for another way.

And like all other human beings, he dies, after much suffering, in a brutal way. We need not see the Mel Gibson film to know how very real Jesus' death is. In some Gnostic versions of the story, the Christ leaves Jesus before his suffering and death, but not in any of the four biblical versions. The very human Jesus suffers and dies, all of him dies.

So, Jesus' humanity is on display throughout the biblical witness, but particularly in today's reading from Luke 2. As the story begins, Luke notes that Jesus' parents take him from their hometown of Nazareth to Jerusalem for Passover every year. When Jesus is twelve, they go again, the family celebrates Passover with many others, as usual, then they start to head home and don't realize for a day or two that Jesus is not with them. He has stayed behind in Jerusalem. We wonder how Mary and Joseph could lose track of their boy for this long. Perhaps someone should call Child Protective Services!

I mean, to lose any child seems odd to us, but to lose Jesus? He had to have been quite a talker, the story seems to indicate as much. Wouldn't we miss his talking? Ian was like this when he was very young. He never stopped talking. In fact, we had a friend who offered him an ever-growing sum of money – five, ten, twenty dollars – if he could stay quiet for five minutes. Ian never got the money!

We feel like we would miss Jesus and his talking, but in this time, there is a practice of extended families and close friends travelling in groups together. It is not unusual for parents not to see a boy this old for a while. He could be with cousins and uncles and aunts, call it a sleepover on the road. He's just enjoying his loved ones and friends. But then, it gets to be a day or two and no one has seen Jesus.

So, Mary and Joe begin to panic. They go back to Jerusalem, like any good parents, and find Jesus in the temple among the teachers, asking questions, impressing everyone, except for his mother and father. "Child, why have you treated us like this?" Mary says, "Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety?" We can feel her anger born of fear. Every parent has felt it as has every child.

Jesus has a better excuse than most. He has been in his Father's house. There is at least a wink at divinity here. But still he could have told them! "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" he says to his parents. But if he was so in touch with God and all things significant, why didn't he take the initiative to tell his parents? Because he was twelve, because he was a middle-schooler, it's what they do! They're too self-absorbed to be concerned about anyone else.

The first youth retreat I led in the early 1980's was with a middle school group. Things went well until one afternoon during free time the park ranger drove up with three of our middle school boys looking contrite. They had wandered off and gone swimming in their underwear in the Ohio River right in front of a sign which read – No Swimming!

It was a bold move, led by a seminary professor's son. They were having a great time until the ranger came and threatened to take them to juvenile detention. They said they were with a church group. He didn't believe them. So, to avoid jail, three middle school boys, who had never sung

a note at any youth meeting, proceeded to sing “Father Abraham” with all the verses and movements.

I would have paid good money to have seen that! I wanted to laugh, but I also wanted to wring their necks. It was not safe to swim there, they had no business sneaking off, but that’s what middle-schoolers do.

Jesus sneaks off to be about something good and noble but he still sneaks off. So, the story ends with the family going back to Nazareth and Luke noting that Jesus was obedient to his parents. He was the Savior in the making and he was divine as well as human, but he wasn’t going to live through adolescence unless he straightened up!

I don’t want to overstate things. Part of the message of this story is that Jesus reveals his interest in holy things very early on. As Lutheran pastor Niveen Sarras notes, this is the behavior of a young prophet and future leader (from workingpreacher.org). It not only resonates with Jewish readers of Luke’s Gospel but Gentile readers as well.

Roman leaders revealed their prowess at an early age. For example, Augustus was twelve when he gave the funeral oration for his grandmother, Julia Caesaris, the sister of Julius Caesar. Luke presents Jesus as a new kingly figure even better than Augustus. But still Jesus’ humanity is on display throughout this story.

This is good news for us for a number of reasons. For one thing, the idea of incarnation, of God taking on human flesh, depends on the full humanity of Jesus, and this idea lies at the very heart of Christian faith. Incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection all go together in the Jesus story and each needs the other parts. Sometimes it seems like incarnation is the most overlooked in current practice.

We make a big deal over Christmas, more so than we do Good Friday and Easter, but this is due to cultural realities that have nothing to do with the baby Jesus – the man in the red suit, the presents we buy and the social events, not to mention Rudolph and the Grinch. Egg Hunts and the Easter Bunny just can’t compete. As people of faith, we talk a great deal about the cross, Jesus’ suffering and our sin; we cannot help but think about resurrection and our hope for eternal life as we face loss; but how much consideration do we give

to incarnation, the idea of God taking on human flesh, Jesus being both human and divine?

Stories that explore this mystery are helpful because they raise our awareness of how complex incarnation is and how central to our faith. What does crucifixion mean without incarnation? Just another man dies a brutal death and God sends off another to die, a cruel thing to do, as opposed to a part of God's own self dying for us. What does resurrection mean without incarnation? If Jesus isn't human, resurrection doesn't mean anything for us, an immortal man remains immortal, as opposed to the mortal taking on the immortal, the perishable the imperishable (1 Corinthians 15). Incarnation is critical to our faith and the humanity of Jesus matters as much as the divinity.

But the humanity of Jesus we see on display in this story from Luke is also good news for us because it means that God is near us, God is with us, God experiences everything we experience. Hebrews 4:15 puts it this way. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested (tempted) as we are, yet without sin."

The idea of incarnation is difficult to embrace. In the interfaith dialogues I have done, this is the challenging part of Christianity. In Islam, Jesus is viewed as a prophet. Many Jews see him as wise teacher. That he died on a cross is not disputed, though the meaning of his death is. The idea of eternal life is not alien to Islam, and contrary to popular thought, not completely dismissed in Judaism. As with almost all subjects, there are many different views about the afterlife in Judaism.

But the idea of incarnation is anathema to Jews and Muslims and an obstacle for those outside organized religion. Yet the idea lies at the heart of our faith and for those who embrace it, it means that God is not afraid to get dirty, God enters the messiness of our lives, in the form of a crying baby who dirties diapers. It doesn't get much messier than that and this is good news for us. It means God is familiar with all the details of our lives, all the heartache and frustration, all the joy and exhilaration, God has experienced it all as one of us.

So, the humanity of Jesus we see in Luke 2 confirms the idea of incarnation and lets us know God is near to us, and then it lets us know we have a genuine example in Jesus. Christ is more than an example to

Christians, he is our Savior and Lord, but he is our example. And to be an authentic example, he has to be fully human like us, not walk just above the ground. In other words, he can't cheat with his divinity.

We put exemplary people on a pedestal and one of the reasons is that when we do, we no longer have to pay attention to them. If they are not really like us, if they are not tempted like us or if they have special powers we do not, then their accomplishments are irrelevant. We can admire them but need not be troubled by comparing our lives to theirs.

But if a person has the same temptations we do, as Hebrews says Jesus does, and has no special powers we lack, and yet still lives a righteous and just life, we may have to pay attention. That's what Jesus' humanity means for us. We have to pay attention.

If he can refuse to seek revenge against those who harm him, even forgive those who put him to death, we can forgive those who harm us. If he can cross all the boundaries of culture and religion in extending love to all people, we can break out of the limited mindsets of who we are supposed to love. If he can forgo all the accolades that might come his way in the process of living a simple life of service, we can be a little less self-absorbed and a little more interested in the needs of others. If Jesus is fully human, he is our example in all things.

When the film *The Last Temptation of Christ* came out, many church folks got upset, as they did with *The Da Vinci Code*. People talked about the sensuality in the film as being especially problematic, but the real issue with the film, as with the Nikos Kazantsakis' novel on which it is based, was that it did not hide the humanity of Jesus. Jesus dreams on the cross about what it would have been like to have led a normal life, to have married and had children. He dies on the cross, but in his imagination, he struggles with the temptation to be normal.

The very idea of Jesus even thinking about this was offensive to some, but this is absurd if he was tempted in all ways like us. Like the film, scripture doesn't hide the humanity of Jesus, thank God! We need a human Jesus as much as we need a divine Jesus, and according to 2,000 years of church tradition, this is who he was and is.