Book 9

Sunday December 14, 1980

"EVERYBODY LOVES A BABY" Isaiah 35:1-6, Matthew 11:2-11
More Than A Baby

"Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" John the Baptist had been put in prison for his preaching. He had criticized the leaders of the government. While in prison, he had a lot of time to think and he kept getting reports about the man Jesus whom he had baptized and who was supposed to be the Messiah. Large crowds were reported to be following Jesus.

Maybe all this was to be expected. But in John's mind, Jesus was not acting like John thought the Messiah would act. He kept hearing about Jesus healing people of their diseases, forgiving sinners, the blind were receiving their sight, cripples were walking, lepers were being cleansed, and good news was being preached to the poor. John heard how Jesus had forgiven a woman caught in adultery who was about to be stoned to death. He heard that Jesus had eaten in the home of a tax collector. At a wedding he had turned water into wine and by some he was called a wine-bibber and a glutton.

As John the Baptist sat in prison, he began to wonder, "Did I make a mistake? Is Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah?"

So John sent some of his disciples to find out what was going on. They came to Jesus and asked, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Jesus' answer to them was, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up and the poor have good news preached to them." You will therefore have to decide for yourself on the basis of what is happening.

John the Baptist had foretold the coming of the Messiah in somewhat different terms. He pictured the Messiah as primarily a judge who would be stern and demanding. He threatened his hearers with fire and brimstone. In addition, John had lived an entirely different kind of life than Jesus of Nazareth. He had taken a vow of poverty, lived in the desert, his main food was locusts and wild honey. He never attended wedding celebrations or parties. He undoubtedly thought the Messiah would follow a similar pattern. So he asked, "Are you he who is to come or shall we look for another?"

John the Baptist had to discover that there is often a lot of difference between a thing and the idea of a thing. Have you ever prepared for someone you were expecting and then when that person arrives and you get to know him or her, you are quite surprised and maybe even disappointed because the individual did not fit your idea or pre-conception of what he or she would be like.

John the Baptist had his own idea of what the Messiah would be. He had preached about an individual who would have his winnowing fork in his hand; who would clear the threshing floor and gather the wheat into the granary, but the chaff he would burn with unquenchable fire. Now in prison, he only heard how Jesus was healing the sick, helping those in need, forgiving sinners and preaching good news.

We don't know how John received the answer which his disciples brought him, but from later history we can conclude that John accepted Jesus as the Messiah, even though he didn't fit his original idea.

How about us? Most of us have some kind of idea in mind of the kind of person Jesus was, and we have some conception of what God is. Yet we too, like John the Baptist, can always expect to be surprised because we never know all there is to know about God.

J.B. Phillips, in his remarkable little book, "Your God is too Small," shows how frequently our ideas of God are inadequate, too limited, and then if we experience God in a way different from our original idea, we may miss God altogether because we are unprepared to encounter God in a different way. The same is true of Jesus Christ. We like to keep him pictured as we like him best.

I suspect that one reason our whole culture loves Christmas so much is because everybody loves a baby. At Christmas we emphasize the Christ as a baby, and that is part of its inexhaustible pull on the minds and hearts of humanity. But it is also a liability . A great many people become so entranced with the beautiful story of a baby in a manger that they miss the chief point of the story. A baby is so harmless, so helpless, so dependent, so vulnerable. We can become charmed with the story of a baby and grow quite sentimental about it. It does not ask

that we do anything about it. It does not demand any vital change in our way of thinking and living.

Many people therefore, keep Jesus as a baby in a manger. He's quite safe there. Christmas is often called the birthday of Jesus. Most birthday parties, however, do not require the one being honored to revert to being a baby. I suspect that at your birthday parties, you do not each year get back into the crib and celebrate. Most of us don't even get out our baby pictures.

But each year at Christmas it is easier to lapse into total infatuation with the "baby." I'm not sure quite how to react to that baby? What is a 2,000 year old baby like? Birthday cards are not available for anyone over 90, and theaters consider you an adult as far as paying admission when you are 12.

The Gospels tell us nothing about the life of Jesus from the time shortly after his birth until he reached the age of 12, and then there is only one brief incident recorded about him at that age. Perhaps the evangelists did not consider this part of his life to be crucial for God's revelation to the world. Perhaps they wanted to keep our minds open to the fuller truth of Jesus as an adult. The Gospel of Mark mentions absolutely nothing about his early life, and doesn't even worry about his birth.

But our way is easier for our consciences. A baby is so easy to worship; so thorough in desensitizing our consciences to anguish, suffering and injustice. Ethics do not proceed from the mouth of a baby. A baby doesn't give us the command to take up our cross and follow him. When the stocking are hung by the chimney with care, we don't want to think that the baby grew up to be hanged on a cross. Babies are so innocent and helpless. They haven't yet learned to accept or reject our definitions of success or failure.

So like John the Baptist in prison, we can make the mistake of thinking of Jesus only in terms of what want him to be. And our temptation at Christmas time is to keep him as a baby. We have no trouble worshipping the baby Jesus, but have difficulty standing at the foot of the cross.

Remember Jesus was a baby, but also remember that he was more than a baby. The babe born in the stable was to be a sign to the shepherds of Bethlehem--a sign that this child was the Savior and that peace had been established between God and all people. The chief point of the story is that the baby grew up! He became the sternest challenge to a world of hard power that has ever been made. He challenges all our worldly ways. He was no sentimentalist, he was a complete realist! Everything opposed to love and unity in our world he declared is doomed and damned. He shows us that in God's kingdom everything according to our worldly standards is upside down.

We say, "blessed are those who have power." Jesus says--"Blessed are meek, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn; blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake."

"Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing." Seek first the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness-love your enemies, bless those who persecute you."

I once knew a man who had a well-to-do aunt who was quite fond of him when he was a baby and a little boy. Since she lived a long distance from him, she had seen him only twice in the past 15 years. Just the same she would send him a birthday card and present every year, but it was always something suitable for a child of six to ten years old.

And every year this young man would pass the gift to some needy youngster who could use it. The case is not difficult to understand. In growing up, this young man had acquired some values which were quite different from those of his aunt. He had become part of a group ministry which lived and worked in the slums of a large city, and he worked to change that part of the city. In doing so he and others had challenged the power-holders and landlords. His aunt could never understand what happened to that dear little baby boy she loved so much. Why did he have to grow up and change? He was so different as a youngster.

We need to remember at Christmas, that this baby Jesus became an adult and that the power-holders of his time rightly saw him as a threat to their way of doing things and so had to crucify him. In Jesus, love and justice are inseparable.

In his book, "Dear Mr. Brown," Harry Emerson Fosdick told of a father's desperate attempt to explain the nature of God to his young daughter who was confused by the stories of war and destruction in the early part of the Old Testament. The father read from the later prophets:"What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God."

Then he read from the New Testament: "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God and the one who loves is born of God and knows God." Presently, the little Girl responded thoughtfully, "Daddy, God grew better as he got older, didn't he?" That's one way of putting it. Another is to say that God grows better as we human beings grow into a more mature knowledge of God's revelation.

It's quite appropiate to remember and celebrate the fact that God entered our world in a new way in the person of Jesus Christ and that this Jesus was born in the same way that you and I enter the world. But then our faith has to grow and expand as this Jesus becomes an adult and is always more than our expectations or ideas. This Jesus of Nazareth cannot be kept in the manger or in any kind of box, nor in any creed or doctrine.

It's fitting to worship the baby in the manger as long as we also follow Jesus and worship at the foot of the cross and at the empty tomb. The Christmas story is much more than a story about a baby--it is the story about an individual who grew into an adult and who redeems the world from its sins and who calls us into partnership with God's great and mighty purposes.

Do you want to meet the Christ this Christmas. In another part of the Gospel of Matthew we are told that when we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome those who are strangers, clothe the naked, visit the sick and those in prison, we are actually meeting the living Christ himself. "For as you did it unto the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me."

This is what Jesus wanted John the Baptist to understand, that God is not only our creator and judge, but in Christ, God is also present where we hurt; that God loves us wherever we are and in whatever condition we are, and that God asks us to love people in the same way. That's the true spirit of Christmas!