

“Baby Pictures”

Luke 2:22-40

New Year's Day 2012

When it came to talking about her grandchildren, my grandmother was one of the proudest grandmothers in captivity. She may have done more for Kodak stock than any person other than a professional photographer. She was always getting the latest gadget camera and taking pictures of us. Then she would proudly show them to any and all.

You've heard of the man who said to his friend, “Have I shown you the most recent pictures of my grandchildren?” And the friend answers, “No, and I thank you.” Sometimes I have the feeling my grandmother was the reason for that story.

This all came to mind as I enjoyed the photo board the Worship Division developed for Advent. As I enjoyed the photos and reflected on the Christmas story, I asked myself what parents and grandparents did before cameras, before there were baby pictures. How did Mary and Joseph “show off” their baby?

The answer came rather quickly. Before there were cameras, people took pictures with their eyes, developed them with their brains, and printed them with their tongues. For thousands of years, those were the only baby pictures anyone knew. A father's report in the village store was simple: “Our baby came last night. A boy. About so long. Big fellow; must weigh eight, maybe nine pounds. Just a little bit of hair. Got his mother's eyes.”

Baby pictures are as old as the human race, and in their own way more graphic

than anything a camera can record because they leave room for the imagination of the one receiving the report.

We have 3 or 4 such baby pictures of Jesus of Nazareth. Luke gives us the earliest picture, one that was taken the night Jesus was born. Joseph and Mary had arrived in Bethlehem. They couldn't find a room. Bethlehem was a one-street town, so the possibilities were limited, especially at this time, when people were returning to register for an empire-wide taxation. So Mary and Joseph found a place for themselves in a cave-stable, and just in time. When the baby was born they used the only facility they had; they commandeered a manger for a crib.

The news of the birth spread in a remarkable way. Some nearby shepherds tending their flocks were visited by an angel who told them of the birth. The shepherds, not surprisingly, decided to see for themselves. What they saw made such an impression that they told people all over Bethlehem, and these people were “amazed at what the shepherds told them. The shepherd's baby pictures were so good we still have them today.

The next picture also comes from Luke. When Jesus was just over a month old, his parents took him to the temple for a special Jewish ritual. The event, not unlike an infant baptism, also had picture taking. In one, an old man, Simeon, is holding the baby in his arms, and he is praying. In another, a devout 84 year-old woman, Anna, is praising God for the child. Of all the grandparents, Aunts, Uncles, godparents, ever photographed with a baby, none could have been more awestruck than

these two who came, providentially, upon the scene.

Matthew has another baby picture, the one where Jesus was still very small and a little company of wise men came to where the family was staying. Surrounded by powerful men from the east, it is a different sort of picture than the one where the baby was surrounded by shepherds.

Do you notice something about these baby pictures, though? They don't reveal any of the details we look for in baby pictures, whether by camera, or word of mouth or announcement. We don't know how much the baby weighed, or his length, or the color of his hair or eyes or anything else. The only physical detail we receive is about his wardrobe. Mary and Joseph wrapped him in swaddling cloth. This was a large square of cloth with a long strip, like a bandage, coming off one corner. A child was wrapped in the cloth, then the long strip was wrapped around and around, to secure the covering. And that's what we know about his physical appearance, how he was wrapped when the shepherds saw him.

The astonishing thing is this: As far as we know, that's the way every baby in that part of the world was wrapped in those days. So when the angel told the shepherds the baby would be wrapped this way, it was like saying, "he will appear entirely ordinary." How will you recognize him? Because he will look the way babies always look!

But Jesus' baby pictures don't tell us if he was little or big, hairy or bald. We don't know if he was cute, or if he appeared average.

Come to think of it, we have no details about Jesus' physical appearance at any point in his life. We know about others, Zacchaeus was short, King Saul was a head taller than others, Elisha was bald, young David was ruddy and handsome. But we don't know anything about Jesus. Here is the person who has been depicted by artists more than any other person in human history, yet the Bible doesn't give us a clue about how he looked.

So what do Jesus' baby pictures tell us? Or, for that matter, what do later pictures tell us? They tell us *not* what he looked like, but who he *is*.

Think of that first picture, the one with the shepherds. The angel said, "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people," because a Savior has been born for all the people. And then a letdown: you will find him in a manger, (is that anyplace to find a Savior?) and he will be dressed the way every baby is dressed, in a swaddling cloth!

You would think that a Savior, the Christ of God, would be dressed in something a bit more becoming, rays of light, for instance.

But God is saying, if Jesus is to be the Savior, he will have to be like every one of us. His most distinguishing feature is that he is not distinguished at all. He is a baby, like every person that has ever been born. By this unique ordinariness, he can be Savior to every person who is ever born.

The second picture has the same quality. Jesus is brought to the temple for the same ritual every Jewish boy would

experience. Again, the photographer saying that this baby is like every other baby.

And yet, different. Utterly different. Remember the shepherds get the word, not through village gossip, but through an angel, and then a chorus of angels. So also when Mary and Joseph bring him to the temple for the customary ritual, they are suddenly joined by an old man, Simeon and an old woman, Anna, who have been waiting years for this day, though they had no idea what sort of day it would be.

Simeon dares to take the baby from his father, and prophesies over him. Anna gives ecstatic thanks for the baby. And the customary ritual becomes extraordinary.

I mentioned earlier a fourth picture. We often miss it. It is in John's collection. We miss it because it is unlike other baby pictures. It begins with the moment of conception, not when Jesus was conceived in the womb of Mary, but when the plan itself was conceived. "In the beginning was the Word," John says. And then the baby picture, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us." Now there's a baby picture for your photo album. It's as if a camera had captured a ray of light beyond the reach of the human eye, or a device had recorded sound outside the reach of the human ear.

So what does that have to do with Christmas? Everything. We are always looking for baby pictures of Jesus. That is we want Christmas to be a sentimental time. There's nothing wrong with sentiment. I am a prince of sentimental. But sentiment has its place and limits.

And it goes beyond its place when it begins to fence in the profound wonder and truth of Christmas. Frankly, Christmas is not to be lost in cards and chatting family letters, family get-togethers or yearly office parties. Good and wonderful as these things are, they are not really what Christmas is about. It is also not about pageants and music and talk of world peace. For as beautiful and praiseworthy as they may be, they are extensions of Christmas, not its heart.

You see, Jesus didn't come to give us a sentimental holiday; he came to save us. He didn't come because we are nice people, but because we are broken people. If we let "Merry Christmas" (and I'm not talking culture wars here) become simply "Season's Greetings," and if the *holy* day becomes just a holiday – well it will be as if the shepherds leaving the manger had told their friends, "We've just seen the cutest little baby boy!" And as if the wise men had sent a congratulatory letter rather than traveling weeks in order to bring their gold, frankincense and myrrh.

The baby pictures of Jesus that Matthew Luke and John share don't tell us anything about the way the baby looked. And that may disappoint us because we like cute baby pictures. But they do tell us who Jesus was and is, the very Son of God, and our Savior. And they tell us why he came, because without him there is no hope for us.

I realize by saying that, I may have ruined your image of Christmas. In fact after the last couple of minutes you may now see me as something of a Grinch stealing Christmas – despite my pants last week – because I've delivered bad

news, that short of God's intervention we are hopeless, when we prefer at Christmastime to have as many fuzzy and uncomplicated feelings as possible.

But the truth of the matter is that everyone of us knows that Christmas is not *simple*. Not as *we* experience it. Because our Christmas celebrations are always intruded upon by some very "unChristmas" feelings: feelings of bereavement, of lost friendships or relationships; or of sickness or loneliness or wistful memories of Christmas past.

All of which is to say that our human scene is quite hopeless unless God intervenes to heal it. And that's where Christmas comes in. It is so much more, you see, than a pleasant feeling of sentiment. It is the story of our salvation.

That's the baby picture. A picture so much more than the beguiling recital of physical characteristics that we look for in baby pictures and so much more than the sentimental year-end photos we send out or post on Facebook.

The baby picture we want to see, is not the one that shows what he looked like, but who he was for you and for me, at Christmas, and throughout our lives.