

# *Hold the Baby*

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A recent newspaper article asks, “What would happen if you peeled back the layers of a masterpiece by one of art history’s greatest painters?” The answer: “Dead bodies might suddenly appear.”

New technologies have enabled art historians to look beneath the surface of centuries-old paintings and see what the artist—or someone else who sought to improve on the original—thought needed to be changed. A project known as “Inside Bruegel” has applied this technology to the artwork of sixteenth century Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel. In several of Bruegel’s paintings, in the layers just underneath the surface, researchers discovered graphic depictions of dead bodies, often right alongside the detailed living people Bruegel so memorably captures.

Historians believe that it wasn’t Bruegel who painted over these corpses, but others who later decided that such graphic depictions of the dead had no place alongside the living.<sup>1</sup>

This discovery suggests that Pieter Bruegel and the writer of the gospel of Luke would have gotten along well. For neither of them is willing to sugar-coat the realities—the often unpleasant, difficult realities—that are part and parcel of what it means to be human.

Many of the details of the Christmas story come from the gospel of Luke. It is Luke who has the newly-pregnant Mary sing a subversive song about how God will fill up the hungry and send the rich away empty. It is Luke who tells us this young unmarried peasant couple had to travel far from home with Mary nine months pregnant. It is Luke who offers us the only details we have of the birth itself. It is Luke who says that the first people to hear the news of God incarnate come to earth were not kings or rulers but lowly shepherds.

Like Luke’s gospel, Bruegel’s paintings are filled with details of ordinary people and events. In his painting “The Census at Bethlehem,” he depicts the scene from Luke when people from near and far come to Bethlehem to be registered. Bruegel reimagines this story as a contemporary event taking place in a wintry Flemish village. A group of people gather at the entrance to a building on one side of the painting, while elsewhere a pig is being slaughtered, children play in the snow, a leper is begging, and others are going about their business.

You could so easily miss the young, pregnant woman on a donkey being led by a man whose face is hidden, but whose body looks weary and worried as he leads the donkey and his wife toward the crowd. If you didn’t know to look for them, you wouldn’t even notice they were there.

The writer of Luke would surely have approved. Of the four gospels, Luke’s is written for the most ordinary of us, including—maybe even especially—all those who have been pushed aside and marginalized: the young, the poor, the refugee, the laborer. Luke wants to make sure we know that this baby, who is nothing less than Emmanuel, God-with-us, came not for *some* but for *all*. Luke wants us to know, there are no extras in this story. *Everyone* belongs.<sup>2</sup>

Like Bruegel's paintings, Luke's story is full of details that pull us close: the sight and sound and smell of the animals and the angels and the woman giving birth, the bands of cloth used to wrap the baby up, the weight of that baby in his mother's arms. Luke, more than the other gospel writers, wants us to get up close and personal with this infant Jesus.

Luke wants us to *hold the baby*.

A colleague of mine performed his first infant baptism before he had children of his own, so he didn't have much practice holding babies. When he took the baby from its mother's arms, he broke the number-one rule of baby-holding—support the baby's head—and the baby's head fell backwards as the congregation collectively gasped. The baby was fine, but my poor friend was never allowed to forget that baptism.

Even if you remember to support the head, holding a baby changes you somehow. It's humbling, for one thing, to realize that this is how we all started, totally *helpless*, utterly *dependent*, impossibly *fragile*. If the baby you're holding is yours, it's nothing short of terrifying, for holding that baby drives home the inescapable reality that *you are responsible for this tiny being's life*.

Jesus asks something of us that all the other demands of the season do not. It's easy enough to enjoy all the trappings of Christmas—the food, the presents, the parties, the decorations, the music—but the truth is, we can enjoy all of that without getting too close.

But if we come close enough to actually *hold the baby*, we see Christmas for what it really is, even though it makes our heads spin: the God of the universe contained in a tiny, fragile, human-flesh package as *finite* and *mortal* as you and me.

Holding the baby requires us to show up, not with arms full of everything we have gathered and made and bought for others, but *empty-handed*, ready and willing to receive what God has gathered and made and bought for us. Holding the baby means we come with humility and vulnerability, admitting that we don't have it all figured out, that there are situations and there is suffering we cannot think or buy or talk our way out of. Holding the baby asks us to admit our need for God, no matter how many layers we have buried it under.

Holding the baby also invites us to look beneath the surface of Christmas and find God even there, on the darker side of the holidays—right alongside the loneliness, the family conflict, the financial anxiety, the grief, the fear that after Christmas Day our problems and the world's problems will all still be with us.

Luke invites us to hold the baby and remember that if we come close enough, we can find God *everywhere*, with every person, in every situation. The birth of this baby—God in flesh so human that it too can and will *die*—means that God is found not just where there is beauty and hope and new life, but even, and especially, where there is suffering and injustice and despair and death.

Frederick Buechner once wrote,

We have tried to make [Christmas] habitable. We have roofed it in and furnished it. We have reduced it to an occasion we feel at home with, at best a touching and beautiful occasion, at worst a trite and cloying one. But if the Christmas event in itself is indeed...all it's cracked up to be, then even at best our efforts are misleading. The Word become flesh. Ultimate Mystery born with a skull you could crush one-handed. Incarnation. It is

not tame. It is not touching. It is not beautiful. It is uninhabitable terror. It is unthinkable darkness riven with unbearable light. Agonized laboring led to it, vast upheavals of intergalactic space, time split apart, a wrenching and tearing of the very sinews of reality itself. You can only cover your eyes and shudder before it, before this: “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God... who for us and for our salvation,” as the Nicene Creed puts it, “came down from heaven.” Came down.

Buechner concludes: “Only then do we dare uncover our eyes and see what we can see. It is the Resurrection and the Life she holds in her arms. It is the bitterness of death he takes at her breast.”<sup>3</sup>

May you find the courage to put down all that you’re holding, come a few steps closer, and hold the baby. As you gaze upon his fragile human face, may you know the promise he brings: that the God who sent Jesus to be with us as one of us holds you—even you—close in God’s arms. God gazes upon *your* fragile human face with the love and awe and wonder of a mother and father gazing upon the beloved face of their newborn child.

#### Notes

1 Nina Siegel, “Peeling Back the Paint to Discover Bruegel’s Secrets,” *The New York Times*, November 23, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/23/arts/design/bruegel-kunsthistorisches-museum-technology-layers.html>

2 Thomas Are, “Christmas at Luke’s House,” December 16, 2018, Day1.org: [http://day1.org/8310-thomas\\_are\\_jr\\_christmas\\_at\\_lukes\\_house](http://day1.org/8310-thomas_are_jr_christmas_at_lukes_house).

3 Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter’s Dictionary* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1988), 30-31.