

Theology for Thinking People: Incarnation

John 1:14-18

Nadia Bolz-Weber is a Lutheran pastor in Colorado. She's a different sort of pastor from most of us straight-laced types. She is heavily tattooed and pierced; she dresses like she's in a motorcycle gang; she swears like someone you'd never expect to meet in church. The church Nadia Bolz-Weber founded is called House for all Sinners and Saints. It's a church, she said from the beginning, for spiritual misfits. And because Nadia is smart and funny and very thoughtful in her own deliberately shocking way, she's gotten to be pretty famous. She's written books; she often speaks publicly about what the Church of the future might look like.

I've never really liked Nadia Bolz-Weber. I'm not exactly sure why, except maybe that she's tall and thin and cool—all things I wish I was more of. I've heard her speak at conferences and I met her once. She seemed aloof and arrogant, which is to say she wasn't very interested in me. I was put off by how confident she seemed. Invulnerable, too sure of herself; like she already knew, before she even opened her mouth, that everybody was going to like her. Standing next to someone like that makes me feel small, reminds me of that little fear I carry around with me all the time, that I am not a very interesting person. And so, only semi-consciously I think, I just decided that I was not going to be one of Nadia Bolz-Weber's thousands of fans. I didn't read her books. I don't quote her. I don't consider her part of my tribe.

But Nadia keeps following me around.

A few weeks ago I saw Pastor Jeremy carrying one of her books. That seemed like an endorsement to me; so I had to pick up my own copy and read it. I learned more details about her life, about how, after years of drugs and drinking, she found another version of her childhood faith—just like I did. That she is married now; that she's a mother, just like I am. That her parents too never stopped loving her. And then, in another book I was reading, there was a tribute she wrote to a friend who had died. She said her life feels smaller now because of that loss. I know that feeling. I realized what has of course been true all along; that Nadia Bolz-Weber is not invulnerable at all. She too feels sad and full of regrets. She's not always sure of herself. She's a person not nearly so different from me as I thought.

I have heard it said, 'An enemy is someone whose story you have not yet heard.'

The story right at the center of the Christian faith is that God—the big God, Creator of the Universe God, the God who we often imagine holding out one finger to remind us of all the ways we have been a disappointment—left a grand, distant, impenetrable throne to come and live as an ordinary human being, on the very same earth we live and die on. Just to underline the point, the story makes sure we know some of the details: that God began life as a baby, as dependent on others for care as any of us has ever been. That he died, just like we will; only his death was undignified and unfair in a way most of us will never have to experience.

Some Christians say that Jesus, who lived and died in the first century the way we count time, was God's only child, God's son. Others say it was God himself who came to live among us. I'm not sure it makes much difference whether you think of it one way or the other, whether Jesus was the treasure of God's heart, the way my child feels to me, or whether he was God's very self. Either way, we're just telling the story in a way that makes sense to us. God might tell it differently.

The theological term for this event—God coming to us in a human life—is *Incarnation*, which means, literally, the embodiment of God. An entirely spiritual being taking up life in a frail, imperfect body—the same kind of body we know, the one that changes and regularly humiliates you and eventually gives out—so that God could get closer to us. So God could say, in a way humans had never quite grasped before, how fully, deeply, entirely, God loves you. Treasures you. How fully, deeply, entirely, God is at home in your life.

Theologians call Jesus the *revelation* of God. This means that knowing Jesus is the best way we have to know who God is, to see God face-to-face. More than the Bible, more than any statement of beliefs or doctrine, the life of Jesus tells us what God is like. Jesus was kind and forgiving and inclusive and compassionate because *God* is kind and forgiving and inclusive and compassionate. Jesus sought out and lifted up the poor and the sick and the overlooked because that's what God has always done. Jesus died and rose into new life because this is the pattern of every life. Somehow we'd missed that part. In these first thousand pages of our story, we'd only imagined God in a way that made us feel small and insecure when we stood next to him. We'd mostly named God the Power at the top of the mountain, responsible for commandments and battle victories. And judgments. Judgments always make us feel small, inadequate.

Very few had noticed that God too is vulnerable. That often, even in the early part of the story, God regularly compromised his principles and, for love, overlooked the people's most dramatic offenses. Offered forgiveness and a new start when a death sentence was warranted. Stayed faithful to a relentless love, even when that love was unrequited. God came to be with us in a person named Jesus because we had left those parts out of God's story. And God wanted us to understand that until we know that love part, we're missing the point. We cower in the shadow of an enemy whose story we have not yet heard.

Traditional Christian theology says that God entered human life in a person named Jesus to unveil the truth about God's character in a way we could hear and see and understand. That belief is at the center of Christian faith. It's at the center of *my* Christian faith. When Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God he was telling us about God's dream for what an abundant and inclusive creation might look like. When he healed people who were sick or disabled, he was showing us that God's best hope is for everyone to be whole. When he submitted to a system that tried him unfairly, misunderstood him entirely, he was saying that violence has never been God's way, even when it seems to us deserved, even when we give God credit for our victories. When he forgave the people who killed him, he was reminding us that God loves people more than principles. When we tell the story of his resurrection, we remember that in the end love wins, every time.

But I have been wondering something else—and this is the part where I want to invite you to think like a theologian, to wonder with me. When I read the Gospels, it doesn't look to me like Jesus spent most of his time explaining himself to people or defining God to them. Very few of those conversations went like 'You must understand this about me.' Instead, it seems to me, many more of Jesus' interactions with people were him leaning in close to *them*, asking them 'What do you need? What do you want me to do for you? What is your life about?' And so I wonder if there wasn't something God needed to learn as God lived a human life. Whether God needed to be reminded of a stubborn people's vulnerability. I wonder whether Jesus' questions might tell us that God needed to hear *our* stories, so that God could grow beyond thinking of humans as creatures who simply will not return a great love. An enemy whose story God had not yet heard. Maybe God needed to hear for himself the story that says that we too are vulnerable, dependent on mutual connection, just like God is dependent on connection with us.

I am sure Jesus came so that we could understand God more clearly. But I wonder if God changed too, through the experience of being human. Maybe God too grows.

John, the writer of this story of Jesus we read this morning, began his Gospel with big, lofty words.

*The Word became flesh
and made his home among us.
We have seen his glory,
glory like that of a father's only son,
full of grace and truth...*

And then, by just the third chapter, it's like John sees that a philosophical statement about Jesus was likely to miss something important. There was something concrete and tangible right at the center of this whole big, life-altering story John is trying to tell. About why God became human, went through life in a body, lived a whole life beginning to end, just like ours. He remembered how Jesus once started a sentence. 'For God so loved the world...' it began.

God *so loved* the world.
That changes everything.

Nadia Bolz-Weber's benedictionⁱ

Blessed are the agnostics.
Blessed are they who doubt.
Blessed are those who have nothing to offer
Blessed are the preschoolers who cut in line at communion.
Blessed are the poor in spirit.
You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are those whom no one else notices. The kids who sit alone at middle-school lunch tables. The laundry guys at the hospital. The sex workers and the night-shift street sweepers. The closeted. The teens who have to figure out ways to hide the new cuts on their arms.

Blessed are the meek.
You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are they who have loved enough to know what loss feels like.
Blessed are the mothers of the miscarried. Blessed are they who can't fall apart because they have to keep it together for everyone else. Blessed are those who 'still aren't over it yet.'
Blessed are those who mourn.
You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

This is our story. May we never lose our love for telling it.

ⁱ From Afterword in *Wholehearted Faith*, by Rachel Held Evans