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So much has been written about our Lord that one is tempted to ask if there is anything more to say. As the daughter and granddaughter of Presbyterian ministers, I have been a follower of Christ since birth. And yet when I heard John Ortberg’s sermons in the series “Who was this Guy?” as a parishioner at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, I turned to my cousin (also a Presbyterian minister’s daughter) and said, “I never thought of it that way.” Thankfully, our Lord’s story continues to be revealed by inspired teachers who tell it in language that brings it to life for our modern, troubled times. In Who Is This Man? John has written a powerful testament to the impact that Jesus has had on human history, on the human condition, and on our understanding of the obligations of one human being to another.

This book reminds us first and foremost that Christ was a revolutionary figure. The apostle Paul’s summary statement of the faith was a thunderbolt in the ancient world: “In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. . . . There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Before that revelation, one’s status from birth defined one’s life until the grave. But with the coming of Christ, who humbled himself to enter our world as a helpless baby and die like a common criminal, it is now and forever clear that every life is worthy before God. It is from this belief that we conclude, “all men (and women) are created equal.”

Through countless biblical stories we are led to understand that Christ did not just say these things; he lived them. He dined with
outcasts, touched the unclean, recruited women into his ministry, revealed himself after the resurrection to these “second-class citizens,” and chastised hypocrites who piously kept the letter of the law but cared little for their brethren. In the end, he would refuse to save himself from death on the cross in order to fulfill the promise of the resurrection—and in doing so, save mankind.

Those who followed him would begin to act as if every life is worthy. The community of people called Christians would minister to the sick and disabled and build hospitals, pursue universal education, spread teaching through universities, and lift up the poor in faraway places, “for they would inherit the earth.”

John Ortberg has demonstrated that nothing in our human existence has been quite the same since that fateful Sunday so long ago. We join Johann Sebastian Bach in saying (as he wrote at the beginning of his compositions), “God help me.” And we glory in the belief that our Lord answers. But we too often fail to say, as Bach did at the end of his magnificent works, “(Everything) To the Glory of God.”

So the real power of this book is in its exploration of the paradox of our faith: that acceptance of the Lord Christ Jesus is not a pathway to an easy life but a call to do hard things if we are to live in the image of our Lord. “Love my enemies?” “Give my riches to the poor and take up the cross?” “Die so that I might live?”

Jesus emerges from this book as a complex figure with a disruptive set of teachings—sometimes “cranky” with those who don’t get it, often tough on his followers, and yet compassionate with those in need. At the end, we want to know him even better.

In Who Is This Man? John Ortberg gives those who believe and those who are perhaps not so certain a compelling reason to seek answers. And he reminds us that seek we must, because there has never been a more important question in the history of humankind.

Condoleezza Rice
Former U.S. Secretary of State
The New Testament tells about a group of ten lepers who were cleansed by Jesus; only one came back to say thank you, and that one was a Samaritan. Thus, in a single story, the message of compassion to all who suffer, the inclusion of the outcast, and the beauty of gratitude were unforgettably passed on to the human race.

So this is a “Samaritan moment”—a chance to pause and say thank you to a group of people to whom I owe a very pleasant debt of gratitude. I am most grateful to the church I serve for making time available for me to write. This book grew more than most out of our life together, and I’m thankful for more discussions and feedback around this material than I could count.

Glenn Lucke and the Docent Research group—particularly Sharon Miller—were invaluable partners at helping to locate sources and stories worth exploring. An unforgettable breakfast with historian David Kennedy at the home of Bob and Dottie King (who were generous with their home in many ways) was wonderfully instructive about how historians approach their craft.

My friend Gary Moon is much responsible for this book going the direction that it did rather than down a far different path. Scot McKnight and Mark Nelson gave wise counsel at several junctures. Dallas Willard points to Jesus like no one else I know and helped me in a number of conversations to know where to look for the Jesus “wake” left in the sea of human history.
Chuck Bergstrom and Rick Blackmon were, as always, sounding boards and feedback-givers and, mostly, lifelong friends.

Linda Barker with whom I work is a treasure of both organization and creativity. Blues Baker is not only a great friend but also a teammate in ministry; it’s an honor to serve as a cupbearer. Nancy Duarte has been generous in thinking about the message of this book and how it might be communicated in compelling ways; merely entering the space of the Duarte Group can’t help but make the enterer more creative.

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Sealy and Curtis Yates came into this journey partway through and made it much more fun and energized than it otherwise would have been.

My daughter, Laura Turner, is gifted as a writer herself and has been a fountain of ideas and feedback for this book.

N. T. Wright was so surprisingly generous with his scholarship and observations and encouragement that I feel compelled to add the time-honored caveat that he is not responsible for any remaining errors but saved me from a number of others.

Sam and Betsy Reeves generously allowed me to use their house for writing. Sam interrupts a lot and is probably responsible for many errors here.

Nancy, after nearly thirty years of marriage, is with me in the thinking and the writing always.

S.D.G.
On the day after Jesus’ death, it looked as if whatever small mark he left on the world would rapidly disappear. Instead, his impact on human history has been unparalleled.

After his disappearance from earth, the days of his unusual influence began. That influence is what this book is about. Rightly seen, this effect on past and current history will cause any thoughtful person—apart from their religious ideas about Christianity—to ask, “Who was this man?”

You can miss him in historical lists for many reasons, perhaps the most obvious being the way he lived his life. Jesus did not loudly and demonstrably defend his movement in the spirit of a rising political or military leader. He did not lay out a case that history would judge his brand of belief superior in all future books. He did not start by telling his disciples, “Here are proofs of my divinity; affirm them and I’ll accept you.”

Normally when someone dies, their impact on the world immediately begins to recede. As I write this, our world marks the passing of digital innovator Steve Jobs. Someone wrote that ten years ago our world had Bob Hope, Johnny Cash, and Steve Jobs; now we have no Jobs, no Cash, and no Hope. But Jesus inverted this normal human trajectory, as he did so many others. Jesus’ impact was greater a hundred years after his death than during his life; it was greater still after five hundred years; after a thousand years his legacy laid the foundation for much of Europe; after two thousand years he has more followers in more places than ever.
If someone’s legacy will outlast their life, it usually becomes apparent when they die. On the day when Alexander the Great or Caesar Augustus or Napoleon or Socrates or Mohammed died, their reputations were immense. When Jesus died, his tiny failed movement appeared clearly at an end. If there were a kind of “Most Likely to Posthumously Succeed” award given on the day of death to history’s most influential people, Jesus would have come in dead last.

His life and teaching simply drew people to follow him. He made history by starting in a humble place, in a spirit of love and acceptance, and allowing each person space to respond. He deliberately placed himself on a collision course with Rome, where he would have been crushed like a gnat. And he was crushed.

And yet …

Jesus’ vision of life continues to haunt and challenge humanity. His influence has swept over history like the tail of a comet, bringing his inspiration to influence art, science, government, medicine, and education; he has taught humans about dignity, compassion, forgiveness, and hope.

Since the day he did come—as G. K. Chesterton put it—“It has never been quite enough to say that God is in his heaven and all is right with the world; since the rumor is that God had left his heavens to set it right.”

Jesus is history’s most familiar figure. His impact on the world is immense and non-accidental.

Great men have sometimes tried to secure immortality by having cities named after them; the ancient world was littered with cities that Alexander named Alexandria and Caesar named Caesarea. While Jesus was alive, he had no place to live. Yet today I live in the San Francisco Bay area, which has its name because a man named Francis was once a follower of this man Jesus. Our state capital is named Sacramento, because Jesus once had a meal with his followers—the Last Supper—that became known as a Sacrament. You cannot look at a map without being reminded of this man.

Powerful regimes have often tried to establish their importance by
dating the calendar around their existence. Roman emperors would date events according to the years of their reign; they marked past history by the founding of Rome itself. The French Revolution tried to enlighten everyone with a calendar that marked the reign of Reason. The USSR dated time from the deposing of the tsar and theoretically giving power to the people. It formed the “League of the Militant Godless” in the twenties to stamp out faith; a 1929 magazine cover showed two workers dumping Jesus out of a wheelbarrow. But the League’s leader, Yemelian Yaroslavsky, grew frustrated at the stubbornness of faith. “Christianity is like a nail,” he said. “The harder you strike it, the deeper it goes.”

The idea of Jesus trying to impose a calendar on anyone was laughable. The beginning of his ministry was carefully noted by Luke according to the Roman calendar: “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar — when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanius tetrarch of Abilene.” From complete obscurity, Jesus came to public attention for the blink of an eye — maybe three years, maybe as few as one. Yet today, every time we glance at a calendar or date a check, we are reminded that chronologically at least, this incredibly brief life has become somehow the dividing line of history.

Famous people often seek to preserve their legacy by having others named for them. The Bible mentions various characters named Herod or even Herodias who were intended to remind us of Herod the Great. On the day after Jesus’ death, no one in the tiny circle that knew his identity was naming their new baby after him. But today the names of Caesar and Nero are used, if at all, for pizza parlors, dogs, and casinos, while the names in Jesus’ book live on and on.

The quickest and most basic mental health assessment checks to see if people are “oriented times three”: whether they know who they are, where they are, and what day it is. I was given the name of Jesus’ friend John; I live in the Bay area named for Jesus’ friend Francis; I was born 1,957 years after Jesus. How could orientation depend so heavily on one life?

Jesus is history’s most familiar figure. His impact on the world is immense and non-accidental.
No one knows what Jesus looked like. We have no paintings or sculptures. We do not even have any physical descriptions. Yet Jesus and his followers became the most frequent subjects for art in the world. His image settled on in Byzantine art by around AD 400 is the most recognized in history.

He has been portrayed in movies by Frank Russell (1898), H. B. Warner, Jeffrey Hunter, Max von Sydow, Donald Sutherland, John Hurt, Willem Dafoe, Christian Bale, and Jim Caviezel as well as countless others. Songs about him have been sung by too many too count, from the first known song listed by the apostle Paul in the letter to the Philippians to an album (“Under the Mistletoe”) released last Christmas by Justin Bieber.

Even in the field of mental health, if patients have grandiose identity disorders, it is Jesus they imagine themselves to be. (Milton Rokeach’s *Three Christs of Ypsilanti* is a classic in its field.) Do grandiose Buddhists imagine themselves to be the Buddha?

It is in Jesus’ name that desperate people pray, grateful people worship, and angry people swear. From christenings to weddings to sickrooms to funerals, it is in Jesus’ name that people are hatched, matched, patched, and dispatched.

From the Dark Ages to postmodernity, he is the man who won’t go away.

But it’s not just that …

Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan wrote, “Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western Culture for almost twenty centuries. If it were possible, with some sort of super magnet, to pull up out of the history every scrap of metal bearing at least a trace of his name, how much would be left?

We live in a world where Jesus’ impact is immense even if his name goes unmentioned. In some ways, our biggest challenge in gauging his influence is that we take for granted the ways in which our world has been shaped by him. G. K. Chesterton said that if you want to gauge the
impact of his life, “The next best thing to being really inside Christendom is to be really outside it.”

Children would be thought of differently because of Jesus. Historian O. M. Bakke wrote a study called *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*, in which he noted that in the ancient world, children usually didn’t get named until the eighth day or so. Up until then there was a chance that the infant would be killed or left to die of exposure — particularly if it was deformed or of the unpreferred gender. This custom changed because of a group of people who remembered that they were followers of a man who said, “Let the little children come to me.”

Jesus never married. But his treatment of women led to the formation of a community that was so congenial to women that they would join it in record numbers. In fact, the church was disparaged by its opponents for precisely that reason. Jesus’ teachings about sexuality would lead to the dissolution of a sexual double standard that was actually encoded in Roman law.

Jesus never wrote a book. Yet his call to love God with all one’s mind would lead to a community with such a reverence for learning that when the classical world was destroyed in what are sometimes called the Dark Ages, that little community would preserve what was left of its learning. In time, the movement he started would give rise to libraries and then guilds of learning. Eventually Oxford and Cambridge and Harvard and Yale and virtually the entire Western system of education and scholarship would arise because of his followers. The insistence on universal literacy would grow out of an understanding that this Jesus, who was himself a teacher who highly praised truth, told his followers to enable every person in the world to learn.

He never held an office or led an army. He said that his kingdom was “not from this world.” He was on the wrong side of the law at the beginning of his life and at its end. And yet the movement he started would eventually mean the end of emperor worship, be cited in documents like the Magna Carta, begin a tradition of common law and limited government, and undermine the power of the state rather than reinforce it as
other religions in the empire had done. It is because of his movement that language such as “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights” entered history.

The Roman Empire into which Jesus was born could be splendid but also cruel, especially for the malformed and diseased and enslaved. This one teacher had said, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these . . ., you did for me.” An idea slowly emerged that the suffering of every single individual human being matters and that those who are able to help ought to do so. Hospitals and relief efforts of all kinds emerged from this movement; even today they often carry names that remind us of him and his teachings.

Humility, which was scorned in the ancient world, became enshrined in a cross and was eventually championed as a virtue.

Enemies, who were thought to be worthy of vengeance (“help your friends and punish your enemies”), came to be seen as worthy of love. Forgiveness moved from weakness to an act of moral beauty.

Even in death, Jesus’ influence is hard to escape. The practice of burial in graveyards or cemeteries was taken from his followers; cemetery itself comes from a Greek word meaning “sleeping place.” It expressed the hope of resurrection. If there is a tombstone, it will often have the date of birth and the date of death with a dash in between, the length of that human life measured by its distance from Jesus’ lifetime. In many cases, if a tombstone is unaffordable, a grave is marked with a cross, a reminder of Jesus’ death. To this day, if a cartoonist wants a shorthand way of referring to the afterlife, a simple sketch of Saint Peter in the clouds by a pearly gate will be understood. Whatever it did or did not do to his existence, death did not end Jesus’ influence. In many ways, it just started it.

He is the man who would not give up.

But it’s not just that.

Jesus is deeply mysterious, not only because he lived long ago in a world strange to us. Jesus is mysterious not just because of what we don’t know about him. He is mysterious because of what we do know about him.
As N. T. Wright observed, what we do know about him “is so unlike what we know about anybody else that we are forced to ask, as people evidently did at the time: who, then is this? Who does he think he is, and who is he in fact?” From the time on the cusp of manhood when he began discussing God, we are told that people were amazed and his own parents were astonished (Luke 2:47–48). When he began to teach, people were sometimes delighted and sometimes infuriated but always astounded. Pilate couldn’t understand him, Herod plied him with questions, and his own disciples were often as confused as anybody. As Wright said: “People who listened to him at the time said things like, ‘We’ve never heard anyone talking like this’ and they didn’t just mean his tone of voice or his skillful public speaking. Jesus puzzled people then, and he puzzles us still.”

Jesus’ impact on history is a puzzle. When we turn to look at his short life, it has this same puzzling quality. No one knew quite what to make of him.

But it’s not a random, absurd, meaningless puzzle.

Understanding his life is like trying to wake up from a dream. It’s like listening to an answer which—when you get it—you’ll realize you always somehow knew. Like light on a strange path that, when you follow it, turns out to lead you home.

Jesus is as hard to nail down as Jell-O. Kings think that if they name his name, they can co-opt his authority. But Jesus the liberator keeps breaking through. When people claim his authority for slavery, a William Wilberforce or Jonathan Blanchard sees in him the call to freedom. He inspires Leo Tolstoy, who in turn inspires Mohandas Gandhi, who in turn inspires Martin Luther King Jr. He inspires Desmond Tutu to dream up and pray up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The number of groups claiming to be “for” Jesus are inexhaustible; to name a few: Jews for Jesus, Muslims for Jesus, Ex-Masons for Jesus, Road Riders for Jesus, Cowboys for Jesus, Wrestlers for Jesus, Clowns for Jesus, Puppets for Jesus, even Atheists for Jesus.

Labor leader Eugene Debs claimed him as the friend of socialism:
“Jesus Christ belongs to the working class. I have always felt that he was my friend and comrade,” while Henry Ford said his capitalism was Christian idealism. The Quakers found in him the command for pacifism (“when Christ dis-armed Peter, he dis-armed us all”), while Constantine was converted by the promise of battlefield victory through the cross (“In this sign you will conquer”).

Look at the people Jesus brings together: Jesse Jackson and Jerry Falwell; Jim Wallis and Jim Dobson; Anne Lamott and Thomas Kincaide; Billy Graham and Billy Sunday and Bill Clinton and “Bill” Shakespeare; Bono and Bach and Bev Shea; Galileo and Isaac Newton and Johannes Kepler; Thomas Aquinas and Thomas à Kempis; T. S. Eliot and C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien; George Washington and Denzel Washington and George Washington Carver; Sojourner Truth and Robert E. Lee; Constantine and Charlemagne; Sarah Palin and Barack Obama; John Milton and Paul Bunyan and Mr. Rogers and Jimmy Carter and Peter the Great.

Something about Jesus keeps prodding people to do what they would rather not: Francis of Assisi gives up his possessions, Augustine gives up his mistress, John Newton gives up his slave trade, and Father Damien gives up his health.

A secular British curmudgeon named Malcolm Muggeridge was brought up short while visiting an Indian leper colony run by the Missionaries of Charity. As he saw Mother Teresa in action, he realized with the force of sudden insight that humanists do not run leper colonies.

He is the man nobody knows.

But not just that.

The first person to write about him—who would become known as Paul—said that Jesus appeared to him unbidden and unwanted. And he had a strange way of continuing to show up where he was not always sought or even welcome.

Novelist Mary Karr was a lifelong agnostic, daughter of a mother who married seven times, set Mary’s toys on fire, and tried to stab her to death. Karr was the celebrated author of *The Liars’ Club* and a chronic alcoholic. Jesus was the last person in the world she was expecting. She
said: “If you’d told me a year before … that I’d wind up whispering my sins in the confessional or on my knees saying the rosary, I would’ve laughed myself cock-eyed. More likely pastime? Pole dancer. International spy. Drug Mule. Assassin.”

Jesus was a teacher, but somehow not just a teacher. He was claiming to have announced something or discovered something or inaugurated something in a way teachers never did. As Pelikan said: “It is not merely in the name of a great teacher, not even the greatest teacher who ever lived, that Justinian built Hagia Sophia in Constantinople or Johan Sebastian Bach composed the Mass in B-Minor. There are no cathedrals in honor of Socrates.”

How does Jesus survive his followers? The Inquisition and witch hunts and Crusades and defense of slavery and imperialism and resistance to science and wars of religion come and go and return. Judgmentalism and intolerance and bigotry infect continents and centuries, scandals of money and sex among church leaders never seem to cease, and Jesus’ followers cause him far more trouble than his enemies. Maybe that’s why he seems to move around a lot.

Andrew Walls noted that most religions remain centered in their original homes. But with the Jesus movement things are different. It began in Jerusalem, but was embraced by un Washed Gentiles with such zeal that it began to move across the ancient Mediterranean to North Africa and Alexandria and Rome. Then more barbarians took it to heart, and it began to expand to northern Europe and eventually to North America. In the past century, it has dramatically shifted again: the majority of Christians now live in the global South and the East. When asked why, Walls said that “there is a certain vulnerability, a fragility, at the heart of Christianity. You might say it is the vulnerability of the cross.” Where the faith has too much money and too much power for too long it begins to spoil, and the center moves on.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said once that the name of Jesus was “not so much written as ploughed into the history of this world.”

H. G. Wells marveled that after two millennia, a historian like myself, who doesn’t even call himself a Christian, finds the picture centering irresistibly around the life and character
of this most significant man. . . . The historian’s test of an individual’s greatness is “What did he leave to grow?” Did he start men to thinking along fresh lines with a vigor that persisted after him? By this test Jesus stands first.

Why?

Maybe because of its timing. Maybe Jesus was just a sympathetic figure who happened to come along when Roman infrastructure was good and Greek philosophy was undermining the gods, when paganism was dying and social systems were collapsing, when stability was down and anxiety was up and gullibility was strong and . . . it was just dumb luck. Maybe Jesus was a kind, simple, innocent soul with a good mom and a knack for catchy sayings who showed up in the right place at the right time. Jesus Gump. Maybe his place in history is a remarkable accident.

But maybe it isn’t.
He entered the world with no dignity.

He would have been known as a mamzer, a child whose parents were not married. All languages have a word for mamzer, and all of them are ugly. His cradle was a feeding trough. His nursery mates had four legs. He was wrapped in rags. He was born in a cave, targeted for death, raised on the run.

He would die with even less dignity: convicted, beaten, bleeding, abandoned, naked, shamed. He had no status. Dignity on the level of a king is the last word you would associate with Jesus.

There is a king in the story, though. Jesus was born “during the time of King Herod.”

To an ancient reader, Herod—not Jesus—would have been the picture of greatness. Born of noble birth, leader of armies, Herod was so highly regarded by the Roman Senate that they gave him the title “King of the Jews” when he was only thirty-three years old. He was so politically skilled that he held on to his throne for forty years, even persuading Caesar Augustus to retain him after he had backed Caesar’s mortal enemy, Mark Antony. He was the greatest builder of his day. “No one in Herod’s period built so extensively with projects that shed such a bright light on that world.” The massive stones of the temple he built are visible two thousand years later.

Jesus was a builder. A carpenter. He likely did construction in a town called Sepphoris for one of Herod’s sons. Nothing he built is known to endure.
In the ancient world, all sympathies would have rested with Herod. He was nearer to the gods, guardian of the Pax Romana, adviser to Caesar. The definitive biography of him is called: *Herod: King of the Jews, Friend of the Romans*. The two phrases are connected: if Herod were not a friend of the Romans, he would not be king of the Jews.

Jesus would be called “friend of sinners.” It was not a compliment. He would be arrested as an enemy of the Romans.

Herod ruled in a time when only the ruthless survived. He cowered before no one. He had ten or eleven wives. He suspected the ambitions of the only one he ever truly loved, so he had her executed. He also had his mother-in-law, two of his brothers-in-law, and two of his own sons by his favorite wife executed. When his old barber tried to stick up for his sons, he had his barber executed. Caesar remarked that (given the Jewish refusal to eat pork) it was better to be Herod’s pig than his son. Herod rewarded his friends and punished his enemies, the sign of a great-souled man in his day.

Jesus, when he was a man, would be nearly as silent and passive before Herod’s successor as he was when he was a baby before Herod.

Herod clung to his title to the end. While he was dying, he had a group of protestors arrested, the ringleaders burned alive, and the rest executed. Five days before his death, he had another son executed for trying to grab power prematurely. His will instructed scores of prominent Israelites be executed on the day he died so there would be weeping in Israel.

Herod was considered by Rome the most effective ruler over Israel the empire ever had. No one would bear that title “King of the Jews” again, except for a crucifixion victim impaled for a few hours one Friday afternoon.

We are used to thinking of Herod as the cardboard villain of the Christmas pageant, but he would have been considered great by many in his day, especially those whose opinion would have mattered most. How greatness came to look different to the world is part of what this story is about. No one knew it yet, but an ancient system of Dignity was about to
The Collapse of Dignity

collapse. Human dignity itself would descend from its Herod-protecting perch and go universal.

The lives of Herod and Jesus intersected when magi from the East asked where they could find the one born (notice the title) “king of the Jews.” Herod claimed to follow the religion of Israel, but it was the pagan magi who sought truth with respect and humility. There is something about this Jesus, even on his first day, that had a way of forcing people to declare where they stand.

“When King Herod heard this he was disturbed” (major understatement here), “… and all Jerusalem with him.” Now it’s clear why.

Herod “was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under … Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: ‘A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.’ ”

I grew up in a church that did Christmas pageants every year. We would dress up in bathrobes and pretend to be Joseph and Mary and the shepherds and the wise men. Somehow that Herodian part of the story never made it into those pageants. It became known as the slaughter of the innocents.

This is not the kind of story you would write songs about. The night Jesus is born, all is not calm, all is not bright. That little baby does not “sleep in heavenly peace.”

Herod sends soldiers to Bethlehem into the homes of peasant families who are powerless to stop them. They break in, and when they find an infant boy, they take out a sword and plunge it into that baby’s body. Then they leave. Someone wrote a song centuries later: “O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.” Bethlehem was not still when Herod came for Jesus.

Matthew underlined the pain of the gap between peasant and king: “Rachel weeping for her children.” The rabbis said that centuries earlier, the Jewish matriarch Rachel had been buried in Bethlehem near the major road leading out of Israel so that she could weep for the helpless exiles leaving their home.
Soon some more people would leave. Jesus’ parents would flee to Egypt. Meanwhile, Jesus lay helpless and unaware. Herod, who built cities and ruled armies, was called Herod the Great.

No one called Jesus “the Great.” Jesus is repeatedly given a different title by Matthew: “Go and search carefully for the child . . . the place where the child was . . . they saw the child with his mother . . . ‘take the child . . . and escape to Egypt’ . . . ‘take the child . . . and go to the land of Israel’ . . . so he got up, took the child.”

The title “child,” especially in that day, would be a vivid contrast with “king” or “great.” In the ancient, status-ordered world, children were at the bottom of the ladder. In both Greek and Latin, the words for children meant “not speaking”; children lacked the dignity of reason.

Plato wrote about the “mob of motley appetites pains and pleasures” one would find in children, along with slaves and women. Children were noted for fear, weakness, and helplessness. “None among all the animals is so prone to tears,” wrote Pliny the Elder. To be a child was to be dependent, defenseless, fragile, vulnerable, at risk.

Those were not qualities associated with heroism in the ancient world. A hero was someone who made things happen. A child was someone things happened to. In old stories about Hercules, he grabbed two poisonous snakes while he was still in the cradle and killed them with his bare, chubby little hands. By the second and third century AD, people made up stories about Jesus having great power as a child: in one of them he makes clay birds come alive; in another he magically causes the death of a child. But they are the kind of stories the Greeks made up to give their heroes dignity as children. The four Gospels have no stories like this about Jesus as a child.

Herod the Great made things happen. Things happened to the child Jesus.

There is a reversal going on in this story. The next season of Jesus’ life is introduced with the phrase “After Herod died . . .”

In fact, three times in chapter 2 alone, Matthew mentions the fact that Herod is dead. Matthew wants the reader to know: Herod the Great, with all his wealth, glory, power, and crown, is now Herod the Dead.
Herod died. This is a subtle reminder of a great leveler. Who else is going to die?

A friend of mine gave me a watch I still wear. One hand says Remember, and the other hand says You will die. Every time somebody asks me, “What time is it?” I look at this watch. Every time I look at my wrist, what I see is, “Remember you will die.” A friend gave me this watch. Not a good friend really . . . but it helps me remember.

A new time had come with Jesus, a time when thinking about kings and children would begin to shift. You might say there was an idea lying there in the manger along with a baby. An idea that had mostly been confined to a little country called Israel, but which was waiting for the right time to crawl out into the wider world—a idea which that wider world would be unable to wholly resist.

All peoples in the ancient world had gods. Their gods had different names, but what they shared was a hierarchal way of ordering life. At the top of creation were the gods; under them was the king. Under the king were members of the court and the priests, who reported to the king. Below them were artisans, merchants, and craftspeople, and below them was a large group of peasants and slaves—the dregs of humanity.

The king was divine, or semi-divine. The king was understood to be made in the image of the god who created him. Only the king was made in the image of the god. This was a dividing line between the king and the rest of the human race. Peasants and slaves were not made in the image of the god; they were created by inferior gods.

This is the Dignity Gap. The farther down the ladder, the wider the gap.

But that gap was challenged by an idea that lay there in the manger, an idea that had been guarded by Israel for centuries: There is one God. He is good. And every human being has been made in his image.

Because God is Creator of all, the earth is full of creatures. But human beings reflect the image of God in a way no other creature can, with the capacity to reason, choose, communicate, and invent. Man is a critter who can Twitter.

Imagine what it did to the hearts of the dregs of humanity to be told
that not just the king but they too were created in the image of the one
great God. Male and female, slaves and peasants, made in God’s image.

God said that these human beings are to exercise “dominion.” That’s
a royal word. But it is no longer reserved for the few. Every human being
has royal dignity. When Jesus looked at people, he saw the image of
God. He saw this in everyone. It caused him to treat each person with
dignity. This was the idea to which that little baby in a manger was heir,
which had been given to Israel, which would be clarified and incarnated
in his life in a way not seen before.

The belief that all people are made in God’s image has woven its way
into our world in a manner we often do not see. The United States’
Declaration of Independence begins, “We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their
Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these rights are life,
liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

There is a raft of ideas here: that people are created, not accidents;
that their Creator gives them certain endowments and confers worth on
them. This worth means that they come with certain rights that ought
to be respected for a society to be considered good. This is true for all
human beings—all are created equal.

The idea of the equality of all human beings was not “self-evident”
to the ancient world. Aristotle did not think all men were created equal.
He wrote that inequality—masters and slavery—was the natural order
of things: “For that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not
only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are
marked out for subjection, others for rule.”

Who came in between Aristotle and Thomas Jefferson to change
this?

Yale philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff observes that throughout
world history, human beings by nature tend to be tribal. We don’t think
of “outsiders” as having the same worth or rights. What accounts for
the emergence of this moral subculture that says every human being has
rights?

Wolterstorff gives an amazing answer: the teaching of the Scriptures,
clarified and made available to all the world through Jesus, that every human being is made in the image of God, and loved by God.

There are gradations of talent, strength, intelligence, and beauty. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “There are no gradations of the image of God.”

The reason every person has great worth, for Jesus, is that every person is loved by God. Each person has what might be called “bestowed worth.”

When one of our daughters was tiny, she had one doll she loved above all others; a doll that initially belonged to her sister. She loved that doll so much, she commandeered her and we had to buy her sister another one. She called her doll Baby Tweezers. That doll got loved so much that her dress fell apart, and all she had was her little plastic head and limbs and squishy soft inner body. She then was renamed “Naked Baby Tweezers.” She was not loved for her beauty. She set a new standard for ugly. She was loved: “Because.” Just “because.”

We could never throw out Baby Tweezers. Our daughter loved Baby Tweezers—and we loved our daughter. Baby Tweezers has “bestowed worth.”

We all know this kind of love: Get a pet, live in a house twenty years, raise your kids there. You come to love it—not because it’s more excellent; just “because.”

Novelist George MacDonald delighted in writing about princesses and princes. Someone asked him why he always wrote about princesses. “Because every girl is a princess,” he said.

When the questioner was confused, MacDonald asked what a princess is. “The daughter of a king,” the man answered.

“Very well, then every little girl is a princess.”

Every human being is the child of a King.

The ancient world did not teach this. Ordinary children did not share
the king’s image. They were not created by the same god. And so they grew up in a different world.

In the Roman Empire, some babies grew up to be women, who were generally shut off from education and public life. Some grew up to be slaves, who were needed for their labor but regarded as inferior to those who were free.

Many babies did not grow up at all. In the ancient world, unwanted children were often simply left to die, a practice called “exposure.” The head of the household had the legal right to decide the life or death of other members of the family. This decision was usually made during the first eight or so days of life. (Plutarch wrote that until that time the child was “more like a plant than a human being.”)

The most common reasons to expose a child would be if the family lived in poverty, or if a wealthy family did not want the estate divided up, or if the child was the wrong gender (meaning a girl — more on this in another chapter), or if the child were illegitimate.

The Jews were opposed to exposure because of their faith. Since Jesus was regarded as a mamzer — the descendant of a forbidden relationship between two Jews — he would likely not have survived had Joseph been Roman. Abandoned children were often left on a dump or a dung hill. They most often died; sometimes they were rescued, but usually this was to become enslaved. This happened often enough that hundreds of ancient names are variations of the word kopros, which was Greek for “dung.”

Babies that were disabled or appeared weak were often disposed of by drowning. An ancient Roman law said that a boy who was “strikingly deformed” had to be disposed of quickly. One archaeological dig found “a gruesome discovery,” the bones of “nearly 100 little babies apparently murdered and thrown into the sewer.”

Ancient parents could be as tender and loving as moderns. But children had value to the extent that they could serve the state. And the state was embodied by Herod. In themselves, children were disposable.

Then the child born in Bethlehem grew up. He began to say things about children no one else thought of.

One day Jesus was asked the question, “Who . . . is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Matthew wrote, “He called a little child to him,
and placed the child among them. [Maybe a child named Kopros.] And he said: ‘... Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.’”

Jesus said it wasn’t the child’s job to become like Herod. It was Herod’s job to become like the child. Greatness comes to people who die to appearing great. No one else in the ancient world—not even the rabbis—used children as an example of conversion.

Then Jesus said the kind of thing that would literally never enter the mind of another human being to say: “And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”

Kopros has a new name.

There were many clubs and associations in the ancient world. None of the qualities associated with children—weakness, helplessness, lowliness—qualified one to join any of them. There were no clubs for children. Until Jesus.

Another time Jesus acted out a little parable of this teaching. Children “were brought” to Jesus. The language says they could not even come themselves: passive, dependent. The disciples rebuked the parents. Jesus rebuked the disciples. “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”

A kingdom for children. Before Walt Disney. And the little children came.

As the movement that Jesus started spread, it created an alternative community for children. Early instructions among his followers, such as the Didache in the second century, prohibit the widespread practices of abortion, exposure, and infanticide.

There is an old joke that the most basic of the Ten Commandments for parents is “Thou shalt not kill.” In some ways, that is a new joke; in the ancient world it was the basis of a revolution. Exposure was forbidden—not because the state needed more workers (Caesar Augustus would try to limit it on this basis), but because as the Shepherd of Hermas put it, “All babies are glorious before God.” Saint Ambrose of Milan
said that the church must care not only for babies, but also for the poor, because poverty often destroys their ability to care for children.

Homer did not say that Zeus or Apollo or Pan valued all human beings equally. G. K. Chesterton wrote that the elevation of the dignity of childhood would have made no sense to the ancients. It came into the world through Jesus, and even where belief in him has eroded the elevation of childhood, Jesus’ thought remains: “The pagan world, as such, would not have understood any such thing as a serious suggestion that a child is higher or holier than a man. It would have seemed like the suggestion that a tadpole is higher or holier than a frog. . . . Peter Pan does not belong to the world of Pan but the world of Peter.”

An average life expectancy of thirty or so meant the ancient world was full of orphans. Now for the first time, a community began to collect money to care for them indiscriminately. At baptism children would receive “god parents,” who would promise to care for them if their parents died.

By the late fourth century, a Christian emperor outlawed the practice of exposure for the entire empire. Over time, instead of leaving unwanted babies on a dung hill, people began to leave them outside a monastic community or a church. The beginnings of what would be known as orphanages began to rise, usually associated with monasteries or cathedrals.

Merely claiming a religious label is no more a guarantee of family health now than it was for Adam and Eve. But those who live in a culture truly touched and changed by Christianity view individuals differently because of Jesus, whatever they might think of him. The ordinary and the lowly have great dignity. All children should live. All human beings are created equal.

A few years ago I spoke at an event where the hero was a dad named Dick Hoyt. When Dick’s son Richard was born, the umbilical cord was wrapped around his neck. He was brain-damaged; he would never be able to walk or speak. In ancient Rome, both by custom and by law, he would have had to be discarded.

Dick and his wife brought Richard home to care for him. When he was eleven, they took him to the engineering department at Tufts Uni-
versity to see if a device could be invented to help him communicate. They were told that his brain was incapable of comprehension.

“Tell him a joke,” Dick said. When they did, Richard laughed. The department constructed a computer that allowed Richard to laboriously type out a sentence by hitting a button with the side of his head—the only part of his body he could move.

When Richard heard one day about a benefit race being run to help a young man who had been paralyzed, he typed out a sentence: *Dad, I want to run.* By this time Dick was forty, a self-described porker who had never run over a mile. He somehow pushed his son in a wheelchair over the course. Afterward, Richard wrote the sentence that changed Dick’s life: *When I ran, I didn’t feel disabled.* Dick began to run.

We watched videos of this strong father pushing and pulling and carrying his son over two hundred triathlons. Not a dry eye in the room. More than eighty-five times Dick has pushed Richard’s wheelchair the 26.2 miles that make up a marathon. Dick’s best time is a little over two and a half hours—within thirty minutes of the world’s record, which was not set, as sports columnist Rick Reilly observed, by a guy pushing his son in a wheelchair.

I said earlier that the hero in the room was Dick. That’s not quite right. Dick said that his hero—his inspiration, his courage, his reason for running—is the 110-pound motionless, speechless body of the man in the chair.

The Greeks loved physical excellence and perfection, the nobility of striving. They gave us the Olympics, through which mortals strove to be like the gods of Olympus. They gave us the marathon, the ultimate test of human will and strength. They did not give us the story of a marathon being run by a man carrying his crippled son.

I recently read an article that speaks of a “theology of disability,” which explores how the divine is present in limitation and suffering and handicap. It is a phrase that would have been senseless in Rome.

The child in Bethlehem would grow up to be a friend of sinners, not a friend of Rome. He would spend his life with the ordinary and the unimpressive. He would pay deep attention to lepers and cripples, to the blind
and the beggar, to prostitutes and fishermen, to women and children. He would announce the availability of a kingdom different from Herod’s, a kingdom where blessing—of full value and worth with God—was now conferred on the poor in spirit and the meek and the persecuted.

People would not understand what all this meant. We still do not.

But a revolution was starting—a slow, quiet movement that began at the bottom of society and would undermine the pretensions of the Herods. It was a movement that was largely underground, like a cave around Bethlehem where a dangerous baby might be born and hidden from a king.

Since that birth, babies and kings and everybody else look different to us now—as in the poignant list of David Bentley Hart: “the autistic or Down syndrome or otherwise disabled child . . . the derelict or wretched or broken man or woman who has wasted his or her life away; the homeless, the utterly impoverished, the diseased, the mentally ill, the physically disabled; exiles, refugees, fugitives; even criminals and reprobates.” These were viewed by our ancient ancestors as burdens to be discarded. To see them instead as bearers of divine glory who can touch our conscience and still our selfishness—this is what Jesus saw that Herod could not see.

Strange reversal. Men who wear purple robes and glittering crowns and gaudy titles begin to look ridiculous—(when is the last time a politician attached “the Great” to his name?)—and yet the figure of the child born in a manger seems only to grow in stature. “We see the glory of God in a crucified slave, and [consequently] . . . we see the forsaken of the earth as the very children of heaven.”

He came into the world with no dignity.