

A good cry: A child is born!

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [December 27, 2005](#) issue

Barbara Wheeler, president of Auburn Theological Seminary, tells about flying from New York to California one December to make a speech at Fuller Theological Seminary. She spent three valuable upgrade coupons to secure a first-class seat so she could work on her speech during the flight. As take-off time neared, she was pleased that no one was sitting beside her—more room for her papers, briefcase and laptop. But just before the doors closed, the seat was taken by a woman with a baby, one “small enough to be carried in her lap, big enough to resist being restrained.”

We’ve all been in Wheeler’s position. Your heart sinks a bit, and you prepare for the worst, which, in this case, happened. The baby batted Wheeler’s computer and grabbed her papers. When Wheeler put her materials away, the baby kicked and screamed. Other passengers, who were also trying to work, started glaring. Wheeler gave the flight attendant an imploring look. The flight attendant banished the child and his mother, who was both embarrassed and furious at everybody, to an empty seat in coach. “We all went happily back to work,” Wheeler says, “they no doubt to projects related to mammon, I to writing about God.”

When she arrived at Fuller, seminary president Richard Mouw began the meeting with a brief homily. It was Christmastime, and he read the familiar story in Luke 2. Then he talked about the carol “Away in a Manager,” which is attributed to Martin Luther. “A great hymn,” he said, “but one line is just wrong: ‘Little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.’ Not so. He cried. He cried for us. He died for us.”

Wheeler said she was cut to the quick, and felt terrible all weekend. She knew that the Holy Spirit had arranged for her to be rebuked for her self-importance and intolerance.

Of course he cried. He was a baby, a totally human baby. That’s the point. That is the incredible claim Christians make at Christmas: a claim about the soul-stirring, heart-warming, intellectually challenging notion of incarnation, Emmanuel, God with us, God among us in the birth, the child, the man Jesus—God living among us, God

teaching us, God showing us what it means to be human in his humanity, God speaking the final word about us and to us about our death. Of course he cried.

In a Christmas sermon, Luther asked his congregation to meditate on the nativity by looking at human babies. "I would not have you contemplate the deity of Christ, but rather his flesh. . . . Divinity may terrify man. Irrepressible majesty will crush him. That is why Christ took on our humanity." Or as the Gospel of John says: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."