

Pah rum pah pum pum: To please the Child King

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [December 16, 2008](#) issue

I read somewhere that in a survey to identify what people thought was the most obnoxious holiday or Christmas music, “The Little Drummer Boy” narrowly won out over “Silver Bells” and “Do You Hear What I Hear?” That kind of music is omnipresent in the stores and on the street corners near where I live. The Salvation Army brass quartet has been playing daily for weeks nearby, and on the next corner a lone trombonist blares “Winter Wonderland” over and over. It’s enough to drive one to despair.

I am stopped short of despair by remembering what novelist David James Duncan wrote in *God Laughs and Plays* about “The Little Drummer Boy.” He notes the peculiarity of the song’s premise: an “uninvited urchin, standing right next to the cradle of a newborn baby, banging away on a drum. Have any vindictive relatives ever given a child in your home a drum?” Duncan goes on to suggest that the song’s evocation of the drum—“Pah rum pah pum pum”—is a kind description of the resultant noise:

I liked to picture the infant Jesus’s eyes, so innocent and new that they were unable to focus, startling wide O-pen at the sudden banging. I liked to picture God the Father wincing On High, wanting to cover His beloved son’s ears, . . . send in the wise men to stop the banging, only to sigh, swallow His anger, and think, “Nope. These are the mortals. This is Earth. This is my beloved son among the mortals on Earth. Let the drummer boy drum.”

In the midst of our culture that discusses and argues over the existence of God and the nature of God, Christianity makes a stunningly simple claim. In the child Jesus, God is with us, here in the world, in this mundane life of ours. “Let the drummer boy drum.” The story of Jesus’ birth is a worldly, earthy story: a man and woman pushed around by impersonal political dynamics, powerless victims of Roman imperial

decrees; a long, arduous journey; an inn already crowded with guests; a birth out back in the dirt and chaos of a cow barn. God with us.

Think of what the story says about God—about how vulnerable God is. God puts this whole project in the hands of a carpenter and his wife. God comes in a way that forces individuals to make decisions and act on them. God becomes vulnerable to, subject to, human beings whose decisions and actions either will or will not advance God's kingdom. When God acts, it is not a matter of pulling strings, pulling off great cosmic miracles. It is a matter of stirring a man or a woman to be responsible, to live and act faithfully, to do what God wants done.

Much of the world will stop for a time again to listen to a story that they already know—the story about God's vulnerability, God's love and God's presence in the midst of life at its most human.

Duncan says that now when he hears "The Little Drummer Boy" for the first time each year, "the chills run from my spine to my eyes, sometimes spilling over as the truth . . . hits home. . . . The truth of our spiritual poverty gets me every time. The line, 'I played my best for Him pah rum pah pum pum.' What more can one offer, no matter how silly or bad it sounds? The line, 'Then He smiled at me pah rum pah pum pum.' What more can we hope for than to please . . . the child king?"