

“The Unburdening”

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I. “And she gave birth to her first born son,
and wrapped him in swaddling
cloths, and laid him in a manger.”

Advent has become Christmas.
Waiting becomes having.

For nine months she waited, wondered,
felt heavy,
burdened with God.

What type of burden was it, do you think?
the kind we carry, you and I,
with God on our backs,

weighed down
protecting him from those who say he’s dead
or dated?

If we don’t carry him, who will?
Who will keep the church from falling down?
Who will keep the world coherent?
Who will make it work
and keep it tight
and see that all the corners are square?

Who will convince his critics that he’s cool
and bring his awful language up to date
so folks won’t think he’s quaint
or queer or crude?

It’s heavy work keeping God abreast of the times.

II. Joseph tried to carry God awhile.

A righteous man, his Mary plump with child
and not by him he knew,
so what to do?

“Divorce her quietly, the goodly thing,
the godly thing.
Keep the world in order
keep it tidy.
Punish evil, crown the good.”

“The world can be an awfully messy place.
But someone has to do the dirty work
of pointing out to people where they’ve botched
and how they’ve bungled
and what they have to pay.”

“With God on my back
all’s right with the world
Don’t worry God
we’ll keep things straight
you and I.”

But in a dream—or was it?
Joseph heard
a voice that spoke a word he had to heed:
“Joseph, put me down from off your back,
and let me come to you in my mixed way.”

So Joseph woke from the dream he had been living.
And let disorder stand.
He took beloved Mary, filled with God,
untidy God
and kept her.

III. Some shepherds came
to see the baby
lying in the manger.

They came to see if it were true,
what the angels said.
They came to see if he would smile
and pierce their fear and dread.

With God on your back
it’s hard to see him smile.

How easy to assume he must be frowning.

There’s precious little time for smiling, though.

To save the world takes all our time—and more.

A little mirthless laughter
here and there
to break the strain.

But it's hard to laugh with God on your back.

He wasn't on the shepherds' back.
They knew that now.
He was there
in the manger.

And when they smiled
he smiled.
You know how it is with babies
and with God.

You laugh, he laughs
You sing, he sings
You cry, he cries
You mess it up, he feels the pain
Immanuel, God with us.

IV. I won't forget the wise men
with their gifts.

Always gifts when God's around.
Everyone carries gifts to God.

But what do the gifts carry?
what unspoken wish do they express?

“I love you.”

or perhaps

“please love me back”

or both.

The God on our backs gets lots of gifts.

Bargain gifts:

I'm doing this for you
now will you see
that life in all its danger
won't fall in on me.

See that Jimmy gets through school
and Mama keeps her health
And Willard gets a raise
and Martha finds a nice boy.

Bargain gifts to say, "You owe me one."
Bargain gifts to keep the giving coming.

and Duty gifts:

Here God, will this be pleasing?
Is this enough now?
Will it be enough?
Will it ever be enough to get you off my back?

Duty gifts, bargain gifts, heavy gifts, encumbered gifts.
Always gifts for the God on our backs,
offered, cast, hurled, flung
at the God on our backs.

Are those the gifts the Wise Men brought?
all that way to buy off another god?

Or was it that they'd finally been found
by the God who won't be bought
can't be bought
doesn't want to be bought.

A God without servants
A God without slaves
The longing God in search of friends.

When they saw *his* star,
they fell down and worshipped him.

V. So Advent waiting, now, is over.
Christmas having is begun.

And she gave birth
and took him in her arms,
and wrapped him up all snug
against the cold.

She carried her burden,
and bore a son
to get God off our backs
and into our hands.

Hold him
Hug him
Pat him
Stroke him
Squeeze him
Poke him
Push him
Pull him
Jab him
Shove him
Yank him
Strike him
Pound him
Nail him
Tomb him

See him
Touch him
Hear him
Taste him

Off of our backs, through our hands, into our lives.

God with us. Alleluia!