

A Gift for Lent from Jill Peláez Baumgaertner, Poet and Theologian

Colleagues,

I spent some time yesterday smudging foreheads with ashy crosses. Were someone to ask why I did that, I'd want suddenly to hand them the poem you're about to read, withholding further comment until they'd spent some time digesting it. Then, I think, we'd talk for a while about *imago dei*, the image of God (see Gen. 1:27, Heb. 1:3), and how the cross of Christ brings this to light, and how that little Ash Wednesday gesture makes this very point in a terse and simultaneous telling of God's law on the one hand, God's gospel on the other.

Compact, succinct, yet somehow full and rich and comprehensive: there's a magic of sorts in the way Jill Baumgaertner tells law and gospel. She read this poem to us at the Crossings conference two weeks ago (see ThTheol 870). We sat there rapt. As she explained, the Zola of the title is her granddaughter; though in the mystery of poetics, she's also the young man on whose coffin I'll be tracing another cross this Saturday. He too is "...the dream of God, / himself, his image." (God grant the words to underscore this when it's time to do the preaching.)

I wrote last week about Jill's vocation as professor and dean at Wheaton College. I add this week that she's a long-time member of Grace Lutheran Church, River Forest, Illinois, where her pastors have been glad to call regularly on her gifts both as teacher and preacher. I'm not at all surprised that they'd do this. Nor will you be when you're done reading.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

Zola, *Imago Dei*, on her First Birthday

The dust swirls, did it unfurl
this girl, God's deep yearning
for her, once clay,
now *imago dei*?

Reach back to Adam,
in Eden's first mud and mire,
shaped whole but not entire,
given blood and bone
but made alone
with all his intricacies of marrow
and joint, a narrow
cage around his heart,
dreaming Eve and then upending
Eden with sin's smart?

The image, we all know, was smudged.
Was it play? Adam would say,
"Let's put it this way:
I am Eve's father
and her brother and her mate,
the result of God's hunger to create,
a mélange of rib and earth and breath
at first no death, just promises kept.
God's own. His face was mine.
Mine, his. Mine, hers. Hers, his.
But we ate. And then we wept."

So into this stunned world, Zola
burst, at first indignant
at the dazzling light
after the dark tones
of her mother's heartbeat.
Tiny knob of nose, grey eyes,
a fierce grip, this bright sprite,
her face her father's.
They form each other's image.
He says, "Let's put it this way.
I am her father. For life.
This was not play. I,
a donor egg, and IVF,
then Heidi's belly stretched
beyond belief. But there she was,
the relief of birth, of breath.
Her face was mine. Mine, hers."

This spring, amidst Lent's
dirty snow, the cross's
promise still ahead,
the buds in trees still
tightly wrapped, the year's
potential yet untapped,
the branches filigreed
against the sky, baroque
their arms and fingers
pronged and split,
like roots inverted,
Zola's birthday. She is one.

In her purity of gaze,
delight of play,
her belly laughs
at small dogs' pranks,

she is God's hunger
and his plan, her mother's
longing, her father's yen.
Yet she will know
sin's twilight and its night,
and through it all
though sometimes dim
the gospel light.
We pray she reaches
for this unbroken gleam,
this holy bauble,
as she does her father's arms,
her mother's face,
and safe from harm
there find at least the trace
of Eden, wiping the film
from the dark glass,
to see Christ's face,
enigma, ambiguity,
until he is revealed,
the cross, his grace—
the mirror, resilvered
by his glory,
he alone
making God known.

And Zola, once abstracted
in a Petri dish,
becomes herself,
born flawed,
but still the dream of God,
himself, his image.

Jill Peláez Baumgaertner

A note: this poem will appear in a book forthcoming from InterVarsity Press, [The Image of God in an Image Driven Age: Explorations in Theological Anthropology](#).