

God with us: Children's letters to God

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [December 15, 2009](#) issue

There is a veritable feast of recommended books and DVDs in this issue, and I have already circled and clipped several and left them lying in conspicuous places just in case anyone is wondering what to give me for Christmas. But my favorite Christmas book, which I pull from the shelf every Advent, is *Children's Letters to God*, compiled by Stuart Hample and Eric Marshall and illustrated by Tom Bloom. You can read each small letter and smile at the pictures in less than five minutes. A few of my favorites include:

Dear God,
Are you invisible or is that just a trick
—Lucy

Dear God,
Thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy.
—Joyce

Dear God,
Maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other if they had their own room. It works with my brother.
—Larry

I discovered *Children's Letters* when I heard a superb Advent sermon preached by the late Walter Bouman, professor at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio. Walt, a big bear of a man with a wonderful wit, introduced his sermon on Isaiah 64:1, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down," by quoting from the original *Children's Letters*:

Dear God,
Are you real? Some people don't believe it. If you are, you'd better do something quick.
—Love, Harriet Anne

It's the oldest, most authentic prayer in human history and as current as the latest neo-atheist best seller. Are you real? Where are you? Why is this happening to me? Please do something.

Isaiah's version of the prayer comes from the time of exile when the people of God were wrenched from their homes and lived under house arrest in Babylon, separated from beautiful Jerusalem and the Temple, the heart of their faith and national pride. We remember them waiting for God to come every Advent when we sing, "O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel."

The actual moment when the prophet prays "if you are real, you'd better do something quick" is when the people do return to Jerusalem and find it devastated, destroyed, the Temple leveled.

That is the situation that prompts the desperate human prayer. Human suffering, and God's role in it, or God's absence, is one of the enduring mysteries with which people of faith have struggled. Elie Wiesel's question "Where is God now?"—uttered while watching a young boy being executed by the Nazis—is asked by every human being who has ever suffered deeply. After the war François Mauriac interviewed Wiesel and wrote an introduction to Wiesel's stunning memoir, *Night*, about his experience in a concentration camp. Mauriac said: "And I, who believe that God is love, what answer could I give my young questioner . . . Did I speak of that other Israeli, his brother, the Crucified, whose cross has conquered the world? Did I affirm that the stumbling block to his faith was the cornerstone of mine and the conformity between the cross and human suffering was in my eyes the key to that improbable mystery?"

That most human question, "Where is God?" prompts the answer of faith: God is there, as people return to their devastated city, as suffering happens, as innocents die, as disease claims its victims. God comes, God is there, in the midst of it all. And that is what lies beneath all the blessed hoopla of Christmas: an idea so big we simply don't have words adequate to express it and so, gratefully, we turn to art, poetry, music, the letters of children . . . "Are you real? If so, you'd better do something quick." And ancient words, more precious every year: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."