

Christmas Eve
December 24, 2021
The Rev. Scott Walters

Once upon a time, a carpenter and his wife were sitting in a pew one Sunday for the dedication of their first-born child, which is the ritual of choice in churches that don't go in for infant baptism. The room didn't look much like this one. Its acoustical tile ceilings were low and flat. The floor was covered in brown industrial carpeting and the windows were made of a textured yellow plexiglass that made what little light got through them look like it was produced by a nuclear holocaust. Which probably did have a way of intensifying the prayers of the people, now that I think about it.

Since the couple were young and earnest and first-time parents, the odds were exponentially greater that their child would be in a cloth diaper that morning than would have been the case for his sister, who came along a few years later. And this detail is actually relevant to the story. Because, to this day, they theorize that an infant wardrobe malfunction was partly to blame when the little boy wriggled just so and then emptied the contents of that diaper onto the front of his father's best khaki pants.

Did I mention the three were in church? Not only that, but that they were soon to be called up in front of the whole congregation for a blessing? Not sharing a common language yet, no one, neither parents nor child, knew quite what to say. This sounds like a bad archetypal dream, but it's a true story. The names have been omitted to protect the guilty, since worshipers will have flown in tonight from parts as far flung as Poughkeepsie and San Diego and no one wants to come all that way only to end up the tiny villain in a Christmas sermon illustration.

But I offer this earthy tableau as a little lived reality to counter some of the nonsense we sing about at this time of year. Lines like "the cattle are lowing the baby awakes, the little Lord Jesus no crying he makes." Come on. "Lowing" sounds sweeter, but it's just mooing, and have you ever been mooed at by an actual cow in close quarters? I promise you'd be wailing if you'd been trying to sleep. So, there's no way on this earth that a shivering baby in a manger is going to be awakened by cattle without a protest.

The line in that carol rings false because a human infant is anything but passive. A baby will not ask you if this is a convenient time for a pacifying bounce or midnight snack or for her morning constitution. She won't ask. She'll let you know by whatever means she has, which often involves wailing, because she doesn't know your language. And you don't know hers either. So for the sake of your sanity, dear caregiver, in the wake of a nativity, you had better give up your illusions of total control.

But imagine it all from the baby's perspective. "The infant searches at his mother's breast..." wrote Galway Kinnell, "Looking for the night he was shipwrecked from — / But when he finds her milk he suddenly tastes/ A brightness that scares him, and his days to come/ Flood on his heart as if they were his past..."

The world really must be a lot of strange and scary brightness to a newborn. And for all the sweetness and intimacy of birth, there is a great chasm of incomprehension between an infant child and even the mother from whom she's just emerged. The child is separate from us, with a will of its own, and anything but passive. And the child and the adult world have not yet forged anything like a common language to bridge the gap.

The everyday miracle is that in the face of this impossible situation, most humans across the centuries have not thrown up their hands and run away. They throw themselves into the task of reaching across the void. The child's cry is how she addresses it with all she has and knows. And what does the adult world do? A world that does have words and grammar and other means for reaching across the distances between us? Well, quite often the grownup world does absolutely whatever ridiculous thing it takes to reach the child.

We begin forging a language that doesn't yet exist with the child by guessing that this bleat means "I'm wet" and that one means "I just want to be held" and then seeing which response makes a difference. We will actually change our proper adult language into gibberish if we think it helps, trying out coos and murmurs and inventing strange baby-talk accents, as if we're tourists trying to communicate with a tiny taxicab driver in a country where we don't speak the language. But the miracle is that, generation after generation, otherwise respectable human beings have humbled themselves in countless ways to bridge the communication gap between them and the bundled-up mystery of will and need that's been born into their lives.

I'm sorry. Maybe you didn't need this primer on how humans come to know the world about them. But in the mystery of the Incarnation, with apologies to Marshall McLuhan, the medium is the message. The question of why God comes to us cannot be disentangled from how God comes to us. And the how involves all aspects and dynamics — not of some otherworldly form of nativity, regardless of Mary's virginal status — but of what happens to all human beings once they've been born into a world that doesn't understand them. A world that they can't begin to understand.

What's more, this Jesus will grow up and teach us a different way to live in a world like ours. And his method will not be to reassure pretty good folks like us that we pretty much see things for what they are. He will tell stories, violate norms, ask questions meant to provoke or expose our deep confusion about how God sees things. He will tell us that the ones we see as last, and least, and lost are the first ones God seeks out and finds. He'll insist that we find our lives by laying them down for one another. That we save them by losing them. And he will live out what he taught us all the way to the incomprehensible love we see on the cross and in the resurrection of that love, even on the far side of death.

And so, when we consider the Christmas proposition that God would enter the risk and mess of human history as an infant, we may even come to see a simple childlike mimicry of the way of Jesus every time an adult sets aside all that she's learned about the orderly world of grownups, and enters the strange wordless world of an infant. Might that even be a small, blurred feature of the image of God that we see in each of us when we humble ourselves, become fools and clowns if that's what it takes to get through to this beautiful, incomprehensible little creature given into our care?

I suppose the question the Incarnation presses next upon us is why do we quit? If we've seen the miracle of relationship and language and connection being forged with a bleating, inscrutable infant, why do we give up on this miraculous divine humility with each other so soon? How much of what's broken in our world could be mended if we kept looking at one another, even those closest to us, as the mysteries that we truly are, and from that place of ignorance, began to forge a connection we couldn't otherwise imagine?

What I know about myself is that when I'm filled with judgment and certainty, I'm pretending I already know all that matters about the person or the situation I'm looking in on. I'm denying the distance of ignorance that always exists between one human life and another. And we do so much damage with our false certainties. We think we know exactly what will solve the rest of the world's problems — whether of the old or of adolescents, of fathers or mothers, of the coupled or the uncoupled, foreigners or neighbors — and impose our solutions from a distance, without listening to the lives that are actually at stake, in all their mysterious complexity. But, mercifully, that's not how God went about mending this world, is it?

And, friends, if we truly trusted the way of nativity, as we proclaim that God did at Christmas, I wonder if we might even begin to see that those parts not only of other people, but of ourselves that are confused or scared or uncertain, crying out to be understood, are not flaws and failures. They are holy. In fact, by the light of Christ's Nativity, we might just come to see our curious, loving incomprehension about the world and one another as God, still at work in us ... God, still at work in you on this ordinary and holy night ... God, in your life and mine, still trying to get through to us, and through the likes of even us, to draw this broken apart world back together.