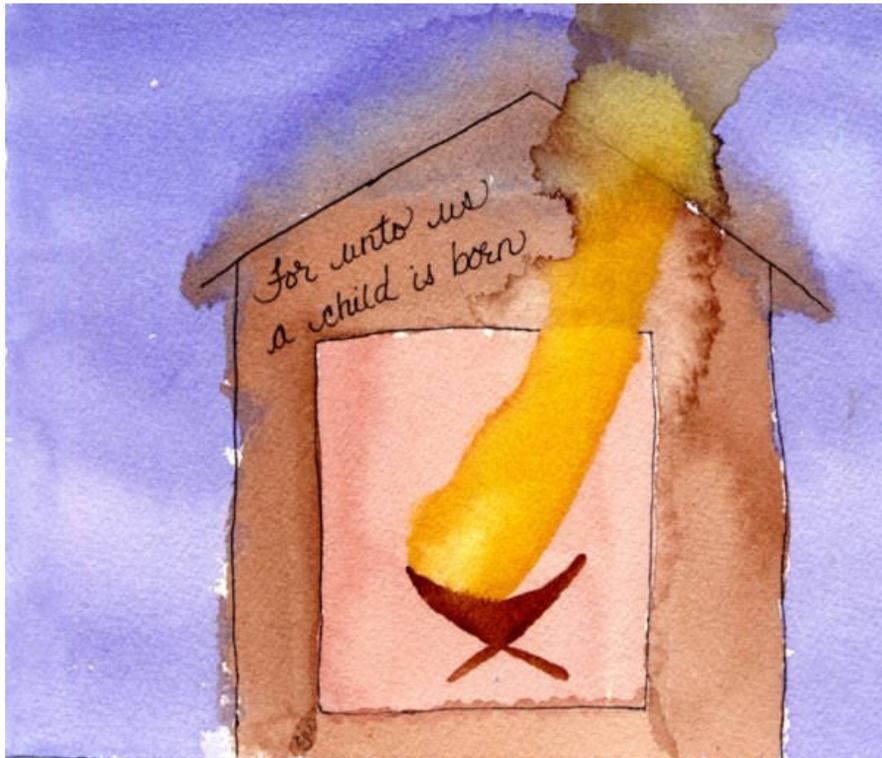


Unto Us A Child Is Born



*Weekly Devotions for Advent 2018
and a Story for Christmas Eve*

By Cathy Warner

Week 1: Shadows of Advent

Clouds scudded at high speed coating the sky gray. Branches bent and bowed, leaves surrendered to the gusts, empty trash cans rolled into drainage ditches. Jets on departure from SeaTac sliced the clouds silently overhead, their engines no match for the noise heralding the coming storm.

Only the winged creatures seemed to rejoice in the fury. Seagulls and crows flapped as if catching waves, and a pair of bald eagles circled over the sea, wings wide, soaring higher until they became two spots of black that turned, plummeting toward the water before gliding above the whitecaps that whipped off Puget Sound, their tail feathers glinting in the fractured light.

We'd just turned the clocks back and the Pacific Northwest leaned into the lengthening dark. My thoughts were dark as well, dampened by shadows of the human soul. Two days before a murder stunned the town. A woman was killed by her live-in boyfriend who posted photos of his crime online before his arrest.

I felt helpless, transported back in time to days when I walked across my college campus with keys spiked between my fingers, trusting no one. As much as I believe in the better angels of human nature, I also know humanity's long history of violence. It has a way, always, of piercing our lives.

The beginning of the Christian liturgical year arrives as North Americans are ushered toward our winter solstice, and the first Sunday of Advent always offers stark words from the gospel: "It will seem like all hell has broken loose—sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, in an uproar and everyone all over the world in a panic, the wind knocked out of them by the threat of doom, the powers-that-be quaking." (Luke 21:25-26 *The Message*.)

The drama doesn't culminate on Christmas Eve with pageants of children

costumed and haloed, all of us singing carols of goodness and joy. Instead, a child is born in exile amid the stench of manure cradled only in straw, and a king—threatened by this infant’s very existence—embarks on a killing spree.

The incarnation was bloody; the crucifixion wasn’t the end of our indiscriminate spilling of life; and the wake of violence and suffering can threaten even the most ardently faithful. Advent storms in, but it also offers the hope of God’s eternal promise, even as we keen our lament.

In the days after the murder townsfolk organized meals, clothes, and school supplies for the four motherless children, and held a vigil to stand against hatred despite their shock, anger, and grief.

In her book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Barbara Brown Taylor describes the “full solar Christianity” that presents us with artificial divisions, pronouncements, and formulas meant to guarantee our safety, and leaves us unable to adequately face and make peace with the darkness and shadows that permeate our lives.

What does it mean to follow Christ deep into the shadows? How do we step into what we can’t see without stumbling on our own fears and inadequacies and falling into despair? Life is perilous. Faith is difficult.

The rain subsided, and a small patch of blue caught my eye. The sky softly wept at my feet while, rising from the water, a rainbow arced overhead—not a small sliver, but a complete arched prism.

My spirits lifted as I remembered what I can so easily lose sight of: God is present in every storm, in the depth of every horror. While the incarnation can’t shield us from harm, it offers the assurance that when we’ve been shattered, Jesus will lift the shards and carry us gently near his heart.

Week 2: Prepare Some Room

About ten years ago I was up against a deadline: I had two hours left to deliver groceries and “Stocking gifts” to the local Christmas project and food bank in the valley where I lived. The donor parking spots at the building were full, as was the agency parking lot. Driving up the unfamiliar street in my hulking minivan all I saw was *No parking* signs. No room anywhere. I pulled into the agency parking lot half blocked with orange cones and *No Parking* signs, hoping to ask one of the volunteers if they knew where I might park. *I’m in luck*, I thought, when I recognized four of the five folks there.

I rolled down my windows and before I could say, “Hi, Mrs. X,” she snapped, “You can’t park here.” The man I didn’t know approached the passenger window. “You can’t park here,” he yelled. Then Mr. X pushed his way forward also yelling, “You can’t park here. We’re expecting a truck.”

Shocked by the yelling, surprised they didn’t recognize me, I said, “I just need to turn around,” and shaking inched my minivan forward, pulse thumping in my ears.

Then a woman I call *Ma* yelled to Mr. X, “She can’t park here.”

“I’m just turning around,” I said loudly at the same time he said, “She’s going to turn around.”

“No, she’s not,” said Ma, “she’s going to hit the posts.”

My fight or flight response kicked in and said *Fight and Flight!* I put the car in reverse and in my nastiest most facetious voice, I shouted as sweat dripped from my armpits, “You know, your welcoming attitude really makes it easy for people to make donations!” I punched the gas pedal, zoomed backward into the street, where thankfully, there was no oncoming traffic, and then took off up the road, named,

believe it or not—*Love Creek Road*. In that moment it should've been named Anger and Shame Creek.

I desperately wanted to go home, but I had to deliver the groceries and gifts then. I parked several blocks away, clutched my heavy bags in my arms and marched down the street, chest heaving, gulping between sobs. I was deeply ashamed of my outburst and walked past the parking lot as fast as I could, staring straight ahead. I delivered my bags inside to an unmanned counter and instead of ringing the bell to summon a volunteer, I set my bags on the counter, filled out my donation form in silence, and left the building thankful the episode was almost over.

As I walked back to my car on the far side of the street, Mrs. X called out, "Hi there, Cathy!" cheerfully as though greeting a long-lost friend. I was shocked. How could she possibly, after she and her husband and the other volunteers had just yelled at me?

"Hi," I said without slowing or looking her way. It was a mean bitter hello, with no trace of friendship or forgiveness.

Driving home I tried to figure out how decent people--the volunteers and me--Christians who were out to do good deeds for strangers, failed to extend care and compassion to people not on our lists of the needy.

I needed a little grace in that parking lot, a little understanding, a little room to maneuver, a little time to think. Who knows why I didn't receive it, maybe I was the fiftieth car that'd disrupted their preparations. Maybe they were cold and hungry, and the long-expected truck was late in arriving.

I thought about complaining to the project coordinator—whose name graced all the appeals for gifts and food mailed to my home and church—or writing Mrs. X and telling her why my "Hi," had been so malicious, but I wanted to get beyond my hurt without blaming others. I didn't want to hold onto the wound and to the way it made me feel sick in the bones. I needed to extend a little grace to others and myself, so I prayed and took my *Relaxed Wanderer* Chinese herbs and calmed down eventually. Later I called my prayer partner and after I recounted the incident, she said with her usual wisdom, "God always reminds us that we're human."

When I think about Christ's coming, I think of a line in *Joy to the World*, "Let every heart prepare him room." If Christ was there in the parking lot, and I'm sure he was, I did a rotten job of preparing room. I was reminded painfully of my human failings. Thankfully God has more hands and feet in this world than mine. And thank God I'm not alone in falling short—in sin.

Our ancestors in the faith were just as human and imperfect. Back when Jesus arrived folks were expecting a different kind of Messiah and overburdened innkeepers were turning away lodgers left and right. Joseph and Mary, tired and hugely pregnant, needed a little grace when they arrived in Bethlehem to pay taxes. And that's what they received a meager scrap of grace, a tiny bit of room, a cow stall out back. It was the best that innkeeper could do, and because God can take our pittance and make it suffice, it turned out to be enough.

As we journey toward Christmas with all the busyness and stress even our desires to good can bring, let every heart prepare *some* room, and may that *some* be enough.

Week 3: Angels Sing

One December afternoon when I was in fourth grade, I sat in the living room in front of our bare Christmas tree, waiting for my sister and my mother to come home so we could decorate the tree together.

We had a set of paper angel ornaments, in pink, yellow, and blue with fuzzy flocked dots on their dresses. They stood about two inches high with yellow curls stapled to their paper heads and gold paper wings stapled to their backs. Some held guitars, some autoharps like my teacher played, but my favorite were the singing angels who held white microphones with red tips in their outstretched pipe cleaner hands.

I carefully unpacked the angels, placed them on risers made of the empty ornament boxes, separating the altos from the first and second sopranos, and sang for them, a one-girl Mormon Tabernacle choir belting out every Christmas carol I knew. And I knew quite a few. I was an enthusiastic school choir member who'd memorized popular carols like *Joy to the World*, *Silent Night*, and *Angels We Have Heard on High* to the fourth verse, and even knew one verse of *O Come All Ye Faithful* in Latin.

Though I was a latch-key kid home alone I didn't feel lonely singing with my angel choir. Given my enthusiastic refrains, you would've thought I was a true believer, a girl who walked the three blocks to church each Sunday, collecting attendance stars and memorizing Bible verses. You'd have been wrong.

I went to guitar mass sometimes with my Catholic friend across the street. Less often, I rode with another neighbor to a Protestant church somewhere across the freeway. What I knew about church was that I didn't belong. About God, I knew even less.

I married when I was a twenty-one-year-old college student and that December my mother divided all her old ornaments between my sister and me. When we unwrapped the faded paper angels, she divided the mandolin and harp-playing angels in two equal piles—I hadn't guessed the instruments quite right. When we came to the microphone angels, both my mother and my sister laughed at my assertion and insisted they were holding candles, pointing to red tips that were obviously flames.

I hung my mute angels from my tree, singing carols without benefit of their mikes. The songs still touched something hidden deep within me, but they couldn't mask my growing longing for something that felt missing from my life. Something a college degree, political activism, good deeds, and a good husband couldn't satisfy—something I would later understand as the life of the soul.

To light a candle, you have to step close to the angel holding the flame. You have to be brave and intentional, and it can be as scary as walking into a church alone and uninvited looking for God. I wanted my angels to carry microphones, to fly around the neighborhood, sing out good news, and give me direction from a safe distance. I was curious about God but cautious. I didn't want to get too close or personal.

But that's what God does at Christmas, gets down in the straw and muck and has the nerve to insist on birthing something new and wrinkled and helpless smack in the middle of our lives.

When I was in my mid-twenties God came to me when I stood naked in the shower one morning. It was as though my angels set aside their microphone candles, grabbed some buckets, filled them with love, and poured them down upon me. You can't get more personal than that.

The prophet Isaiah says we who've walked in darkness have seen a great light. I'd add that we who've walked in a parched landscape have been drenched with rain. May that light and that love, however and whenever and in whomever it is revealed, shine brightly, pour out abundantly, and nourish our souls.

Week 4: Kneeling At the Manger

For over three decades now I have knelt at the manger each Christmas, my heart bowed in gratitude before the infant Jesus.

Before that, for me, Christmas was a time to exchange gifts, carol at nursing homes, and marvel at the abundance and enthusiasm my grandparents channeled into decorating their homes. It was a time when holiday cheer, feasting, and shopping amid department store Santa Clauses was supposed to be enough. But choruses of silver bells and gifts of clothes and toys were never rich enough, full enough to set my spirit singing.

I remember the first Christmas after God laid claim to me in my mid-twenties. That cold sunny morning as I sang carols to myself, it was as though God embraced my wounded heart and held the pain of my childhood splintered by multiple divorces that still bound me in fear, letting me know I wouldn't have to heal alone.

Growing up I knew loss, but I didn't know how to let something die or mourn its absence. Instead I carried my losses as though they were treasures feeling as if my life was held together with scotch tape and band aids, and that without my wounds, I would have nothing to call my own.

That is why I needed the manger, a place where I could stop trying to be perfect in order to guarantee love, a place where I could kneel and give over the things I carried. At first, all I could offer Jesus was brokenness, a mosaic of myself made from shards of abandonment and fear. So that is what I gave the newborn God.

And this is what God gave me in those early years of faith: a husband who loved and didn't leave me (as my parents and step-parents had), and two babies to hold and tend. Holy infants who touched their tiny hands to my cheeks, who cooed and smiled and cried. Infants to cuddle and rock and sing to while I wiped their tears and learned how to mother them.

While I mothered my babies, God mothered me. God held me and sang to me and wiped the tears from my cheeks. And slowly, year by year, God took every wound, every hurt and helped me mend. Then ever so gently, God suggested I leave those things that once bound me at the manger along with all the gifts from wise people.

Others might lay their burdens at the cross, but my gifts belonged at the birth scene. My awe and gratitude began not with Christ's sacrificial death, but with the incarnation. I was amazed that such hope was born at all. Such hope in the form of the infant Jesus, trusted to the world. And such hope growing inside myself that I scarcely believed it.

Who could imagine a helpless infant born to bring healing? And who would listen? Would he be able to lead us to reconciliation without having to give up his life? And what kind of God would require such a sacrifice from a beloved child? Would I be willing to give up my own child for the sake of others? These are questions I grappled with (and still do) when my own faith was newborn.

It took me decades to believe there are gifts in death, that the living can be healed by those who are no longer with us, particularly by Jesus—who was born, crucified, resurrected, and somehow still lives.

My hope was born from a small seed hidden in darkness, much as a baby journeys from the womb, so it's right and fitting that I came crawling to the manger in my infant faith and that I return to that barn in Bethlehem each year. I imagine the scene like this:

I look into the straw at the beautiful child sleeping peacefully, then ask (because I needed to be told), "Are you sure? Is this for real? Dare I believe?"

"Yes," answers Mary, the mother who is younger yet so much more certain than I. She strokes Jesus's head.

"Yes," answers Joseph who has built a fire, changed the straw, and found blankets for Mary and the baby.

“Oh, yes,” answer the wise men and women who’ve made themselves at home among the barn animals, unwrapping their satchels, revealing herbs, ointments, jewels. “We’re sure,” they say. “We’ve been watching, waiting, paying attention. This is definitely it. The beginning of something incredible.”

The women proffer cooking pots and provisions. The savory smell of their cooking begins to compete with straw and hay and animal and smoke. “Will you stay and eat with us?” they ask.

I look around the barn crowded with the holy family and wise strangers, their smiling faces shining in the lamplight. The straw is scratchy under my knees; the lip of the manger is brittle and splintered beneath my fingers. I am nobody, just a girl in a faded dress looking for a reason to hope.

“Yes,” I say. “Oh, yes. I will stay.”

A Christmas Eve Story: I Knew All Along

I knew all along that this baby I was carrying, this child growing large within me, kicking my ribs, shrinking my bladder, straining my back, wasn't really mine. But I didn't want to think about that because I was already so completely, thoroughly in love with this person who was coming.

I changed for this baby. Before I even met him, or her. I swallowed vitamins the size of dachshunds. I gave up champagne and all my friends were getting married. I gave up my morning coffee, which wasn't a pretty sight. I gave up my afternoon Diet Coke, even chocolate. Chinese food too, after the kid spent a night doing in-utero flips on an MSG high.

The only thing I'd given up for Jeff when we got married was my apartment. This was way different and I didn't want to think about how this kid wasn't really mine. Sure, it was mine to incubate, birth, breastfeed, diaper, drive to soccer practice, swim lessons, and the orthodontist. Mine to rock during months of colic. Mine to teach songs about popping weasels and teapots stout. Mine to explain about the birds, the bees, the poison oak, manual transmissions, and college admissions. Mine, ours if you like, to pay for school pictures, summer camp, prom wear, and tuition. But not mine to keep.

And I didn't want to know this. Because I knew how much it would stab at my heart and make me want to squeeze my baby, once it was born, against my chest so tightly that neither one of us could breathe.

That morning I'd seen a holiday commercial where the perfect mom has cookies baking in the oven and two kids playing under the Christmas tree. She

answers the phone with her oven mitts on, smiles that sweet, sad smile, sits at the kitchen table, and rests her elbow next to the flour canister.

So I dialed my mother and sobbed while I told her that I was fine and did she know how much I loved her? And did I ever tell her, really tell her, that she was a good mother, despite her faults, of which there were many? Did she know that I knew, that despite all that, I was so lucky to have her for a mother?

How I wish you were here with me, I said, even though we both knew she was going to fly out the second the baby was born. In short, I was a mess.

It was Christmas Eve and Jeff and I were busy accommodating each other's seasonal traditions, of which mine was last-minute shopping. All the stores were open late and I waddled along in my red velveteen jumper with the embroidered holly looking like a modern Santa in the land of gender equity. Jeff tucked small bags into the big one from Hickory Farms. I always got my grandmother Beef Stick and smoked Cheddar.

We were strolling, having completed the shopping, through the animated Christmas display in the plaza. Robotic reindeer and motorized Santas shook tinny bells and ho-hoed while *Jingle Bells* and *Silver Bells* and *Frosty the Snowman* played on outdoor speakers. The tip of my nose was getting red so Jeff suggested we go to the Hilton Bar.

We sat next to the window, stirring hot chocolate and sniffed at the fresh pine and peppermint candy wreath wrapped around the little oil lamp at our table.

"We could make one of these and take it to my parents' tomorrow," Jeff said.

Our first Christmas as official marrieds, and we'd impress the relatives with our own holiday creations.

"Here's to the three of us," I said, and patted my belly.

Now have you ever felt a pregnant woman's stomach? There's a reason it looks like a basketball. It's packed solid with amniotic fluid. About ten gallons, it felt like, in my case. But I liked knowing there was this shield, the Kendra force field around my baby. An entire womb universe where my voice echoed in the baby's ears at all hours assuring him or her that he or she was perfectly loved and perfectly safe.

Jeff reached across the table, put his hand on my hand and looked deep into my eyes and smiled. And it would've been really sappy, the kind of thing that made me reach for Kleenex, except at that moment, the baby scraped something sharp, like an elbow, across the width of my belly and we both felt it. Even my jumper twitched.

"Youch," I said. "How many times have I told you, no roughhousing inside?"

"That's my Sumo baby," Jeff said.

I slipped my feet out of my loafers and onto Jeff's thighs. He rubbed my feet. Then we settled back and watched people walk across the plaza.

Jeff said, "What sort of parents keep their kids out so late on Christmas Eve?" about this family on the sidewalk in front of us.

There was a boy about two, I think, who refused to climb in his stroller and kept stretching up his arms to be carried. We could see his mother, who had a baby strapped to her chest, shake her head no. She pushed the empty stroller in front of her and walked away. The kid threw himself on the cement lashing. You could tell he was wailing. The mother turned around, tapped her foot and held up one finger, then two, then three. The kid stopped thrashing, but he lay face down on the cement. The mother folded each finger back into her fist.

Please don't hit him, I thought, because you wouldn't believe what I'd seen and heard since I started paying attention to kids and their parents. Jeff squeezed my feet so hard, I thought he might cut off the circulation.

Then the mother unzipped the baby carrier and lifted the baby out. It stiffened and opened its mouth, crying. She strapped the baby into the stroller, then wheeled back toward her son, sat next to him, wiped his cheeks and nose on her sleeve, and kissed the top of his head. After a minute or so, they both stood up. She hoisted him onto one hip, put one arm around his waist and grabbed the stroller with the other.

"Whew," I said.

Jeff loosened his grip on my feet and took one last sip of his drink. "Ready to go?"

"Sure," I answered. "After I visit the ladies' room for the eighth time tonight."

“Let me know how you rate the ambience in this one,” he said.

Afterward we held hands and walked outside toward the parking garage.

Then we heard real bells, and the sound was so much deeper, richer than the piped in music that Jeff said, “Let’s find out.”

So we ended up at a carillon outside Our Lady of Perpetual Grace Cathedral. The music stopped just after we got there.

“Bummer,” I said and looked at Jeff who was looking at the stone steps that led up to massive wooden doors that were thrown open, rectangles of honeyed light seeping out.

“My parents were married here,” he said.

“No way,” I said.

“Way. They took me here once.”

Some people walked past us and into the church.

“Want to go in?” I asked.

“Just a peek,” he answered.

We walked inside. “Cool lobby,” I said, looking at the tile mosaics on the floor.

“They call it something else,” Jeff said. “Narthex, maybe.”

“Okay.” I stepped toward another set of open doors.

There were small sinks near each one with wet sponges like they were expecting a lot of people with unsealed envelopes.

“It’s holy water,” Jeff said, and switched the Hickory Farms bag to his left hand. “You cross yourself, like this.” He pressed his right hand on the sponge, and then touched his forehead, his chest and each of his shoulders.

“What’s it for?”

“I don’t remember.”

We stepped through the next set of doors onto a red carpet that ran between rows of polished wooden benches with magazine racks on the backs. Before I could see anything else a scrawny old man in a faded pinstripe suit appeared.

“Let me help you to a seat,” he said. “The service starts in fifteen minutes.”

Jeff and I started to say, No really, that's okay, we're just looking. But the man looked so unsteady we thought he'd sink to the floor if we said no. He walked us down about twenty rows and said, "How's this pew?"

"This is fine," Jeff answered.

The man walked away. Then Jeff did this little bob thing, where one knee touched the ground on the carpet, he touched his head, chest and shoulders again, then slid into the pew with the bag banging on his knees.

I sat next to him. "What was that?"

"You're supposed to kneel before you sit down, a sign of respect for God, or something like that."

"You didn't do that at The Chapel," I said.

"We weren't in a Catholic church."

"I didn't know it made a difference," I said. This was only the fourth time I'd been inside a church. Once on a grade school field trip to one of the Missions. Then twice in the past year to The Chapel in Orange Heights which looked a lot like the conference rooms in my office building, same padded chairs, same patterned carpet. The only difference was that there was a piano in one corner with a small brass cross on top and lots of flowers up front. My cousin, Marla, got married there last month, and before that, in March, was my grandfather's funeral, right before Jeff and I got married.

"You want to stay?" Jeff asked. "I haven't been to Mass since I was ten. It might be kind of fun."

"What the heck," I said, wondering if we were starting another tradition.

I looked around. One whole wall had huge metal pipes, like in some old black and white movie. There were stained glass windows along the sidewalls, with pictures of sheep and Jesus wearing a toga. There were rows of candles in glass holders on either side of the stage. Some women put money in a bucket, lit candles, knelt in front of them, and folded their hands.

"Did you see that?" I asked Jeff. "Like God doesn't listen unless you pay?"

"Weird, I know," he said. "Check this out." He showed me the magazine from the rack. "It used to crack me up that it was called the *Missal*," he said, "But then I

didn't know how to spell." He flipped through the pages. "And see this, *Preface*. I read it wrong once. I thought it said *Pie Face*, so I told Gary and every time we'd get to that part we'd laugh and Mom would glare at us and say if we didn't simmer down we couldn't go out for donuts."

"And you're always telling me you were a perfect little angel," I said.

When the place was about half full, a dozen people dressed in red robes filed onto the stage and sat on two benches behind one of the podiums. There was a long wooden table in the middle of the stage with two big silver cups and trays with room service covers.

"That's for Communion," Jeff said. "The priest puts wafers on your tongue. They taste like wallpaper paste. But you can't have any unless you go through catechism, and then you're supposed to go to confession first." He pointed to some carved wooden booths in one corner.

"Sounds complicated," I said.

"It is."

Above the stage was a huge cross, about twenty feet tall with a bigger than life Jesus hanging from it with an agonized expression, head drooping toward his bare chest. His eyes were open and blood trickled down his forehead from the thorny wreath around his head. His hands were nailed to the arms of the cross, a sheet was tied around his waist, and his ankles were tied together. It was gruesome. It was huge. There was no escaping it. My eyes kept coming back even though I didn't want to look.

"That's horrible," I said. "How can you stand to look at it?"

"I know," Jeff said. "The one at Saint Anne's scared the crap out of me at first. But you learn to tune it out. You learn to look at it and not think about what you're seeing."

The organ started. The choir sang. Two priests walked down the middle aisle in fancy robes and I followed along with Jeff in the booklet. He knew all this stuff, when to stand, when to kneel, what to sing, what to say. Things I never even knew he knew. Things he thought he'd forgotten.

Then some kids came on stage dressed like sheep and donkeys, and others came in wearing little white robes and halos and began to sing. Mary and Joseph walked in next to a kid in brown sweats who brayed and crawled on all fours beside them.

Now, I didn't know much about church, but I did know the Christmas story wasn't all Santa and Rudolph. I'd seen *It's Christmas, Charlie Brown*. Plus, my grandma had little manger scenes and I used to play with the figurines, sprinkling excelsior and moving them all around the top of her grand piano. And I knew that Mary was supposed to be pregnant, just like me, only more so, and this Mary definitely did not have a pillow in her costume.

But then I cut her some slack, because this was church after all, not Lamaze, and they probably didn't want to muck up the story with lots of groaning and an actual birth scene, because there was no way that Joseph, who looked like he was about six, was going to hold Mary--who was probably twelve judging by her gaudy makeup--under the shoulders and say, "Now honey, breathe with me."

Sure enough, Joseph and Mary kneeled by the empty manger while a soloist came forward from the choir and sang *O Holy Night*. She had a voice that made the hair on the back of my neck prickle, in a good way. When she finished, I looked over at Jeff and he smiled, like church was even better than he remembered it.

Then a woman got up from the front row and handed a baby to Mary. I could tell by the way Mary rocked back on her heels that this was a live baby, not some doll. The kids in the halos stood around Mary, and the choir lit candles circling behind them, and someone lowered the lights and shone a spotlight down on Mary, Joseph, and the baby. Everyone stood up and sang *Joy to the World*.

I felt a little wobbly because it had been a really long day. If pregnancy was this exhausting, childbirth was going to wipe me out. Maybe, I could get in on Mary's deal, and just get handed a baby, easy as pie. But I could see that huge cross in the background behind the spotlight, while everyone sang and smiled, trying to pretend that Jesus wasn't up there dying in plain sight.

I thought about the real Mary and how she certainly hadn't signed up for this cross thing. One of the priests had read something like: *An angel came to Mary and said don't be afraid because you are going to have a child. God says name him Jesus and he will be a great king.*

Isn't it like that for every woman who is going to have a baby? Mothers and grandmothers and friends and coworkers and total strangers gather around. Don't be afraid, they say. If natural childbirth doesn't work, there's always an epidural, and if that doesn't work, a cesarean isn't really the worst thing in the world. A healthy baby, that's all that matters. And your baby will be healthy, don't worry. And he or she will be smart and brilliant because you are giving him or her the highest quality prenatal care and you will no doubt pick the right preschool and sports programs and AP courses and college, and your child can grow up to be anything, even President of our great country.

And if it isn't true, if you know someone whose kid has Downs Syndrome or Autism, or Epilepsy, or lost an arm to leukemia in the third grade, or was killed by a drunk driver in high school, or became a cocaine addict and flunked out of rehab and committed suicide, or got killed in some war in a country no one ever heard of for a reason no one can even recall, well you just don't talk about it.

What if Mary had known?

What if she'd been standing here and looked up and saw the future, this huge cross and her son hanging from it? Would she have named him something else? Paul, John, or Ringo to confuse the angel? Would she have taken off on that donkey to hide out in the mountains, like some crazy hermit, living where the world couldn't find her son, where she could keep him safe?

She risked it. She had her baby boy. She loved him, she treasured him, and he died. Before her. It wasn't supposed to happen that way.

I put my hands on my baby shield, and thought about how much I loved my baby, how I felt like I already knew it, how I was the entire universe to it. It won't always be this way, I thought. I won't be pregnant forever. Someday, sooner than I think, I will push this baby out and it won't be mine anymore. The world will have its way.

I started crying and rummaged through my purse for a Kleenex, when Jeff pulled one of those little purse packs from his pocket. The thought that he'd been carrying them all night for me made me even weepier. He really did love me. And he was ready to love our baby. If I refused to let this baby out into the world where all these bad things could happen, then nothing good could happen either. This tiny creature would never get to be loved by someone else. Would never get to be held by Jeff, or by my mother, or by my grandmother, or by Jeff's parents, or his brother Gary, or Gary's wife and daughter, or by my cousin Marla. My child would miss all the people who would love him or her, people we didn't even know yet.

And that's how it came to me, this idea that having a baby is the ultimate act of hope. It felt sudden, and I don't believe in sudden. I hate it when I read a book and someone writes, *Suddenly it started to rain*. Because if the people had been paying any attention, instead of being wrapped up in their own little worlds, they would've noticed clues long before the drops fell. Clouds rolling in, the sky getting darker, the barometer dropping, the temperature getting colder, wind whipping up, and the too calm before the storm. If they weren't so clueless, they would've grabbed an umbrella instead of getting drenched.

And so I felt that maybe my realization wasn't sudden at all. Maybe there had been clues. Maybe it was the words *Faith, Hope, and Love* gold leafed in big letters on the wooden doors. Or maybe it was because this was our first Christmas being married, and it felt like the start of a history for Jeff and me. One that I wouldn't screw up just because my parents were divorced. Or maybe it was because my whole life had been building up to this moment when I--well Jeff too--when we would give the most precious gift we had, our baby, and trust the world to love it.

And so, watching that preteen Mary on the stage bopping to *Joy to the World* with little baby Jesus starting to squirm in her arms, I thought about God, for about the fourth time ever, and wondered if I had the slightest clue. It seemed to me that God sent children into the world to be loved. And it also seemed to me that things hadn't worked out the way God would've liked. But we were all still here, trying to figure out how to get love right. And I guess that's hope. And I guess that's enough.