

December 24, 2020 – Christmas Eve

OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON

Christianity's Secret Sauce: an Infant. A virtual reflection by Nancy S. Taylor, prerecorded and edited, and presented remotely, via live-stream, in the midst of a worldwide pandemic, the novel coronavirus.

REFLECTION

God must have thought it through very carefully, asking Godself: “What is the best way to get their attention?”

If you were God, how would you go about getting our attention? Fire and smoke? Thunder and lightning? Those are attention-getting. Make a loud noise? Put on a big show? Perform magic? Produce a miracle? Those are attention-getting.

Instead, God elects to get our attention with this (image of an infant). God flags us down, causes us to put on the breaks, to pause, crane our necks, and look, really look, with someone a lot like this (image of an infant). And, that is all the difference. We, humans – or most of us anyway – are enthralled by newborns. We are captivated and charmed by infants.

God chose to get our attention – not forcefully or rudely, not demanding it – but by appealing to our finest instincts, to our capacity for nurture, to our aptitude for gentleness, to our considerable talent for love and sacrifice. For such are the feelings and the behaviors that infants instinctively elicit from us.

In arriving among us tenderly, wrapped in human flesh – fragile, vulnerable, and enchanting – God manages to elicit from us the very best that is in us. Imagine that.

Honestly, we don't always present our finest selves to the world, or to each other. We don't always allow our best and brightest selves to shine through. We don't always put our best foot forward. But a baby, an infant, a child has the means to flip a switch in us. Switching us from preoccupied to attentive, from selfish to selfless, from fuming to cooing, from anxious and irritated to enchanted, from wretched to buoyant.

I learned this the hard way. After my husband's death, after Peter's death to cancer, I was inconsolable, undone. I missed him so. And, I was so very sad for him, for Peter, because of all the people I know, Peter delighted in this life. He relished and savored, celebrated and investigated this world with a mad passion. Peter loved being alive. With his dying I was wretched, desolate until I saw a babe, an infant, whose bright promise recalled me to the future; whose beauty reopened my eyes to see the world afresh; whose presence was consolation to my grief; whose sweetness was as antidote to the bitterness I felt.

God is sly, you see, slipping in in the only way that would bring out the finest in us, drawing us into the shared experience of adoration, wonder, and hope. No loud noises. No spectacular

shows. Nothing threatening or brash ... but this (images of infants). Human. Mortal. Intimate. Precious. Requiring our protection. Requiring the best we have to offer.

Oh, what a hard year it has been. Still is. We are in deep winter. We are in deep trouble. The lurking, slithering peril of an invisible virus. So much death. So much illness and grief. Evictions. Isolation. Jobs lost. Downtowns become ghost towns. The national shame and the wrenching pain, the massive, manifest injustice of racism. Political divisions, making us strangers to one another. Immigrants terrified of deportation and separation from their families. A sickened earth: warming, convulsing, and burning. We are in deep winter.

Yet, on Christmas Day God meets our grief, melts the hardest of hearts, whispers hope to our deep despair, and consolation to our heartache by gathering us around this (images of infants). The birth of every child gives humanity another chance. The birth of the Christ Child invites us to flip an internal switch in our hearts from condemning to understanding, from disdain to genuine curiosity, from pugnacity to peace making, from this day's money-making to stewardship of the planet's future, from forming walls to building bridges, from selfish tribalism to a deep regard for, and a sense of kinship with, all the members of the human family. Such is the daring promise of Christmas.

May you, you who have known such a hard year, remember just how it was that God chose to come among us. Look upon the child. Hold your gaze steady upon this gentle, precious gift from God. Cradle the child in your aching human heart. And see if he does not elicit in you the finest, kindest, bravest, most hopeful human you can be.

Merry Christmas from God.

CREDITS

Thank you to the Old South Church parents of Evie, Isabella, Heyden, Eliot, Francis, James, and Julia for sharing video of your amazing, beautiful, precious, shining, Christ-filled children. We needed that.