

Born of God

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I'm not always enamored with our traditional, staged pictures of the nativity—with Mary on her knees in adoration. I admit, I had a few complications when giving birth, as many mothers do. I won't go into the gory details, but I will say that anyone who has given birth knows the near impossibility of getting down on the cold, hard earth, on your knees for a long time.

Yet, Mary has been in that impossible position for a couple of thousand years, as she lets Jesus flail around in the feeding trough. Though it may have been an instructive composition, allowing artists to include many of the Scriptural elements in the scene, the impossibility of the image is right up there with our iconic Last Supper, with everyone sitting on one side of the buffet table.

The stage had to have been set differently. Mary was surely kicking back on the hay, holding her child, while Joseph scurried around, making sure that she was comfortable. I imagine the scene was much more like the Blue Madonna, [Frank Wesley's](#) depiction of those holy days after Jesus was born.

The focus of the painting doesn't allow us to settle on one point, but it seems to swirl, as our eyes move from Mary's gaze to Jesus' head to the tiny arm reaching up. The aureole does not encircle Jesus and Mary individually, but it encompasses both of them, letting us know that the relationship is holy.

Perhaps it's the color of dark blue, with its depth that pierces time and space, but a vast universe seems to be enfolded in those arms, as Mary, the Mother of God bends over in love and protection. She can't keep her eyes off his tiny face, as her gaze traces the small perfection of his nose, mouth and chin. She cannot help but see glimpses of herself in the baby, as well as the fullness God.

God is born.

As I look at this painting, I can smell it. It must be the top of Jesus' head that transports me to that moment when the scent of my baby's tiny scalp formed such a fierce love within me that I knew I had become someone else. My daughter had not done anything to deserve my love. It was simply in the fact that she existed that ignited an emotion that consumed me, and there would be nothing that she could do to ever make that love go away.

Jesus reaches up, in those disorganized movements. His arm must have come loose from the swaddling cloths as he grasps for a mouth or a nose. His eyes are still learning to focus as he nuzzles for milk, longing for the nourishment as much as the comfort. And we realize that in his weakness, this child is fully God. He does not *become* God as he grows stronger and wiser, but the infant *is* God, even in vulnerability and need.

In this particular season, in the shadow of Sandy Hook, we have been reminded of how many mothers and fathers will have empty arms this Christmas. In so many homes, the laughter and singing has grown mute in blue darkness.

Though we long for a God who would never allow such things to happen, though we pray—blaming, pleading, and hoping for a change in our violent world—we also walk through the tender realities of this season. In this moment when we embrace one another, we adore this infant God. In our vulnerabilities and in our needs, we sense the impossible reality that God embraces us. We are held by the Spirit who gives us birth, who loves us so much that there is nothing that we could ever do to make that love go away. We know that there is something holy about the relationship, the interdependence of incarnational frailty and divine love.

So I cling to this image. And I remember that God is born in us. And we are born of God.