

The beautiful stillness of the Christ child

## **As the rotating nativity spun, I kept watching Jesus.**

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [December 16, 2020](#) issue



(Photo © pabst\_ell / iStock / Getty)

The host pointed to the chairs where she wanted each of us to sit. The hour was late and we dinner guests were hungry. So we listened well. Each of us pulled out our chair and sat down as if on cue. There was a lot of happiness in that dining room. Our friendship is sturdy and deep. The smell of the food was divine.

The host grabbed a butane lighter from the hutch drawer and lit four candles at the base of the centerpiece. Christmas pyramid is the official name for this hand-carved rotating nativity, popular in Germany. Think Jesus on a merry-go-round. Warm air rises from candles to rotate wooden blades above. Tiny wooden sheep graze among miniature wise men, shepherds, Mary and Joseph, and Jesus in a manger. They all take laps in carousel fashion, spinning around a tall axle. It's entertaining to watch for about a minute. Then dizziness sets in.

I noticed a couple of burnt blades that must have resulted from oversized candles or axle bearings insufficiently oiled. We bowed our heads as our host started to pray. Jean spoke of fertile soil and germinating seeds. Migrant workers toiling in tough conditions came next. It occurred to me about a minute into the prayer that she was just beginning. Nervous about those wooden blades catching fire, I opened my eyes to peek at the baby Jesus. He was okay. As she prayed for production facilities and truck drivers, I realized the Lord was going to hear about the entire food supply chain in this one prayer. I peeked again. Jesus was rotating ever so slowly. The opening and closing of my eyes kept happening. It felt unspiritual, though keeping Jesus and the house from going up in flames seemed more urgent than focusing on the eloquence of a prayer. The amen finally arrived. The blades were hot but intact.

It occurs to me that peeking in on a little life of any kind is a precious exercise. Such an experience can transport any one of us into a whole new world. The mother of a three-month-old said to me not long ago, “Even when I don’t hear noises coming through the baby monitor, I just love to go in when she’s sleeping and watch her little nostrils move. It’s beautiful.”

I don’t know about you, but whenever I’ve had the chance to peek in on a sleeping infant it has seemed to me that everything in the world is going to be all right. The peace behind the shuttered eyes of that resting child works on me. I let my guard down because there’s really nothing else I’m supposed to do but adore the little thing. Oh, I do think about how our sometimes cruel world could afford more tender love. But mostly I just take in the moment. The beauty. The miracle. The tranquility.

When we finished dessert at Jean’s house, she gave me permission to blow out the nativity candles. The merry-go-round stopped. I looked down at Jesus. He was fast asleep on the hay.

I’m counting on some stillness this Christmas, especially if there is no in-person worship. At the end of a long and trying year, I want to feel that everything is going to be all right. That grace and truth will prevail. That the peace of the Christ child will be medicine for a hurting world. I’m ready for Christmas.

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Beautiful stillness.”*