

**December 24, 2022 Christmas Eve**

**Isaiah 9:2-7, Luke 2:1-20**

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[Breathing Space Heidi Neumark, Beacon Press, pg. 223. Christian Century, December 16, 2020, Living by the World, page 22, by Heidi Haverkamp, <https://www.npr.org/2022/12/22/1144778470/an-unexpected-source-of-solace-during-an-in-flight-emergency>. My own reflections from Christmas Eve Sermon's past. Material from Mary, Joseph, and a Tea Vendor Named Sami, by Kelley Nicondeha, in Christian Century, September 27, 2022 [https://www.christiancentury.org/article/features/mary-joseph-and-tea-vendor-named-sami?code=02pnWnldm8KbNIV4m3w&utm\\_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm\\_campaign=bf4ba81fce-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_SCP\\_2022-12-19&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_b00cd618da-bf4ba81fce-86340259j](https://www.christiancentury.org/article/features/mary-joseph-and-tea-vendor-named-sami?code=02pnWnldm8KbNIV4m3w&utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=bf4ba81fce-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_SCP_2022-12-19&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b00cd618da-bf4ba81fce-86340259j)

### **God with Arms**

**The peace and wonder and love of the Holy Child, and his family,  
be with you this night. Amen.**

**I love Christmas Eve:** the candles, the music, the angels and shepherds,  
the power of God coming to dwell with us, as a baby, born here, again, tonight.

**And, I know the intensity of nights like this:** they are pregnant with expectation.

We each come (whether that's in person or online), we come with our own stuff.

Some come out of tradition, maybe even obligation,

Some come curious. Many come tired.

A few come fussing or tense, these are challenging days,  
with so many expectations—our own and other people's,  
and COVID complicates,  
and money can feel tight.

Some—who shall remain unnamed!—come amped up on Christmas treats and adrenaline.

Plenty come yearning for a feeling, a memory.

Some come lonely. In a busy season, it can be incredibly quiet.

And there are the memories, the ache of grief that rests close: it's been 5 months, or a year, or 5 years,  
or 35 years, the holidays are tender times.

Add in a snowstorm slash blizzard complicating travel, heightening uncertainty.

And war rages, and beloved ones are at the border, and the Earth groans.

**Take a breath, a deep breath: we are here, this holy night, we are here.....**

**In her book Breathing Space,** Pastor Heidi Neumark tells of how her now-grown son, Hans, then around  
four years old, began asking about heaven as Heidi was putting him to bed.

Heidi told him everything she knew about heaven, commenting: "it didn't take too long."

But Hans pressed, "Will we have a body" in heaven? and then he continued,

with great specificity and persistence, **"Will we have arms?"**

Heidi did her parental best, admitted what she knew and what she didn't know (emphasis on the latter).

But still he asked, night after night: "Will we have arms?"

Exasperated, Heidi finally asked Hans the obvious, "Why do you want arms in heaven?"

She writes, "He looked at me like I was from another planet.

'So that Opa [Grandpa] and I can hug.'"

Heidi concludes, "Christmas is about a God with arms."

**Mary gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger.**

**Dear friends, on this holy night, Jesus is born, God with us, God with arms,**

God in human flesh and blood, and sweat, tears and laughter.

God's arms can hold the intensity of this life, and the intensity of this night:

The hopes and fears that we bring to the manger, God can hold them.

The cry for healing, our healing and creation's healing, God hears the yearning of all creation.

All that we bring, all that we are: our best and our worst, all of this, is in God's arms.

**Tonight's nativity story is well worn and so familiar.**

It's easy to miss the particularities of culture and political context  
slipped in between Luke's carefully chosen words:

An enormously powerful emperor with a shadow looming long,  
a heavy fist, a thumb on the very lives...of everyone.

The ancestral ties of land and history, migration, community.

I, and I suspect many of you, have typically heard this story with the assumption that Mary and Joseph were  
utterly alone in that *big city of Bethlehem*—no room at the inn, it's often translated.

Friends, I think there's more to it: This is where Joseph's people had their roots.

Where aunties and cousins would welcome the young couple, that's what you did.

Where every nook and cranny was occupied, and Mary and Joseph were given a  
a sheltered spot by the family's livestock, for that's the space remaining.

Where women cooked and fed, and when the time came to birth, they likely midwived, too,  
squeezing a hand, welcoming little Jesus with arms outstretched.

These last years have softened our rigid certainty and heightened our value for community and care.

It seems that Jesus and his people would have understood.

**Episcopal priest and writer, Heidi Haverkamp, reflects how she finds the reality of Jesus' nativity stories heartening—"Because," she writes, "I need even more to know that Jesus is with us..."**

These last few days I've been musing about the nativity story,

Why does it matter?

I'm not asking this out of some existential crisis, but rather a longing in this season to remember what is  
important, what matters.

So much can disconnect us from ourselves and from God, not the least routines that have shifted.

In daring to ask that question, **Why does the nativity matter?** I'm pushing myself and you to reconnect.

Heidi Haverkamp's comments ring true for me:

**I need to know that Jesus is with us.**

Or said another way, **I need to know that God has arms.**

That's why Christmas is important to me, especially this year.

I need to know that God isn't unfamiliar with bodies and pain and anxiety, with systemic injustice.

Jesus and his family knew all of this, and then some...

**A story I heard this week captivated my imagination.**

It was on Public Radio, a part of the *Unsung Heroes* podcasts, from the Hidden Brain team.

20 years ago, Kate Baker and her husband and then 2 year old son, Neil, were on a trans-Atlantic flight.

Neil had been healthy when the trip began but quickly a fever set in, and then seizures.

In that hushed, but urgent tone, flight attendants asked passengers if they were medical personnel.

Then came the pilot's voice on the overhead system, Is there someone who can help?

**Kate's husband was seated, holding Neil, who was barely breathing.**

Kate recalls standing in the aisle, the waves of shock washing over her.

"Then she noticed three women get out of their seats and approach" her.

"They were Muslim women wearing hijabs, and they came up to her and put their arms around her.

They started speaking to [Kate]... in a language that she didn't understand."

Kate remembered, "The tone of their voice was so, so soothing,

and they stood there with me, with their arms around me..."

**When the plane landed, their child was doing better and Kate and her family got on a return flight.**

Back home, their pediatrician diagnosed a simple ear infection.

They suspected the seizures were due to the sudden spike in temperature that came with the fever.  
Their doctor treated Neil for the ear infection and he was fine, completely fine.

**20 years later, Kate Baker still remembers that flight.**

She remembers the utterly helpless fear.

And she remembers those three woman, three strangers, who stood with her,  
    steadying her in their arms,  
    murmuring comfort,  
    holding her when she feared the worst.

**On this holy night, Jesus is born into the arms of humanity, the welcome of the whole creation.**

There is a mutuality here that may surprise us:

Mary and Joseph holding baby Jesus,  
    the angel song spread wide, with space-enough for the mystery of this night,  
    the shepherds and their flocks, witnessing this risky birth, daring to tell the good news.

God's care, holding us, however we show up.

We, too, hold in our arms, the potential of this night:

We hold a hand, hug a loved one, steady a stranger with a deep well of compassion,  
    we opt for healing and hold onto hope,  
    we honor someone's experience, perhaps so different than our own, believing, trusting.

**On this holy night, dear ones,**

Jesus is born, God with us, God with arms.

Amen.