

Entwined with us

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [December 14, 2010](#) issue

A character in John Updike's *Bech Is Back* describes his wife's WASPish Episcopalianism this way: "Many of her crowd went to church as faithfully as they played tennis and golf and attended rallies to keep out developers. Yet, their God, for all his colorful history and spangled attributes, lay above the earth like a layer of icy cirrus, a tenacious and diffident other whose tendrils failed to entwine with fibrous blood and muscle."

The Episcopalians in southern Sudan [described by Jason Byassee](#) in this issue do not fit that stereotype of Episcopalians, nor, for that matter, do most of the Episcopalians I know. Yet as usual Updike puts his finger on central theological questions: Is our God distant, ethereal, hypothetical? Does our religion operate on the same plane and by the same rules as middle-class and upper-class American culture?

There was a time when I thought it was important for Advent churchgoers to grapple with Christianity's central intellectual claim about Jesus. I even thought it good to review the fourth-century controversies about whether Jesus was of the "similar substance" or the "same substance" as God. There is only a one letter difference in the Greek words, and seminary students lose a lot of sleep trying to remember which is which.

But now I know that Advent may not be the time to address that issue, when worshipers are frazzled and distracted and worried not so much about the defining relations in the Trinity as they are about addressing Christmas cards and getting the last packages to the post office.

My gratitude for the passion and commitment to truth that drove the theologians of the early church to struggle with the incarnation has deepened over the years. But so has my conviction that understanding is not the issue at Christmas. The issue is trust—and peace and hope. And you get those not by someone telling you about intellectual distinctions but through relationships.

When my children, as they grew up, asked me difficult and sometimes frightening questions, they wanted not only a reasonable answer but a hug—some assurance that they were not alone in facing whatever it was they were facing.

Christmas tells us that here is one who cares about us and comes to be with us. The simple story means that in this vast and mysterious universe, in this sometimes frightening world, we are not ever alone. And it means that God cares about how life is lived in the world. Jesus knew what it means to be tired and hungry and lonely, and he knew what it means to be happy and loved and hopeful. Because of the birth of a child we know that God cares: about cholera victims in Haiti, about frightened Palestinians and Israelis, about children living in poverty, and affluent adults living in meaninglessness and despair.

The birth of Jesus contradicts the idea of a God who "lay above the earth like a layer of icy cirrus." The birth means that we encounter God, not only in elegant theology but in work and in our enjoyment of beauty, friendship and love—in love particularly. This is not a God "whose tendrils failed to entwine with fibrous blood and muscle." Quite the opposite. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).