

Glimpse of the holy: Advent with a toddler

by [Kathleen Hirsch](#) in the [November 29, 2011](#) issue



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A few years ago, on All Saints' Eve, I decided that our family's Christmas season would be simple and, insofar as was possible with a toddler in the family, spirit-centered. Still green to parenting, I defined *spiritual* as anything that reduced my to-do list by half and allowed me a minute to reflect on what, beyond the laundry, mattered.

By Thanksgiving I'd turned off the television. There would be no *Arthur* or video versions of *Winnie-the-Pooh* this Advent.

Every morning of Advent, we opened a door on the calendar and then, over our Cheerios, talked about whatever came up: the wise men on their trek, the guidance of stars, a mother on a donkey. After I picked up my son from a morning at day care, we'd share a quiet lunch and spend afternoons reading Christmas picture books, baking gingerbread men indoors and making snowmen outdoors. Nothing was rushed. There was no stumbling past shopping mall Santas, no staring at TV ads, no frantic filling of empty time or panic over last-minute wrapping.

Each afternoon was more peaceful than the one before. Surprisingly, the work of the season seemed to take care of itself. While we baked and painted, screwed on lids and bagged up parcels for family and friends, I felt grace ripening our preparations into a quiet expectancy.

On the Sunday before Christmas we put up the tree and added new paper chains. After dinner we would set up the crèche and arrange the stable animals in their places of honor, ready for the arrival of the baby Jesus.

I was potting the last of the jam when my son disappeared from the kitchen. I heard rummaging in the living room, then the metallic tinkle of ornaments on the lower boughs. Minutes later he was standing beside me, a solemn three-year-old holding a stuffed red heart that he'd taken from the tree.

"Mommy," he announced. "Pretend that I am Gabriel."

I looked at the chocolate around his lips, the sleeves of his Henley rolled up for wings, and his utterly sincere and serious eyes.

"Kneel down, Mommy," he instructed me.

I obliged. Gabriel and I were face-to-face, inches apart, in front of the stove.

"Mary," he addressed me. "You shall have a son. And this," he extended the plush red heart toward my face. "This is your holy."

Here, he paused for emphasis. "You must carry your holy with you always, Mommy—even around your neck—so that Jesus will know that he is holy too."

I looked at the heart offering, velvet and gold, resting in my hand. What to do with the hot coals of a prophet?

Then, perhaps overcome by the force of his own inspiration, my Gabriel turned and fled back to the crèche to distribute more of the "holy" to the creatures assembled there.

Slowly I got to my feet. For a moment my son had seen heaven and had offered me a glimpse. Not long out of diapers, he had lanced the literal with the intuition of a sage. Truth's vital core, the beckoning center of everything, is its holiness. Without the holy, life—even simplified, even with terrific gingerbread and jam—is dust.

I looked at the heart again. My world doesn't involve a lot of angel sightings, but as I reflected on what had just transpired, I realized that my world didn't leave much room for wonder either. My son was far better attuned to the ways in which the sacred speaks. It comes to us on the wing; it grazes the heart. Only after long

contemplation does it coalesce into something that we can put words to.

"Lest you become like children, you won't enter the kingdom of heaven," the words rang in my ears.

Who deserves such breathtaking moments? Certainly not I, satisfied as I was with a season of reduced consumption and expanded calm. Holiness is wilder and less easily corralled, vaster than picture books and recipes. It erupts into the mundane order of our days and reveals whatever inside of us is on intimate terms with the divine. This was what my son had been trying to tell me.

In *Paul*, his book about the life of the apostle, N. T. Wright argues that Jesus first became conscious of his own inner nature when he stood in the Jordan River and the hand of John poured water down on his head. At that moment, scripture tells us, a dove descended from on high and named his human divinity.

Now I understood this with new insight, because somehow Gabriel had descended upon my son and entered his awareness as a viable messenger bearing an essential truth. Sometimes visions crash through from another realm and we are changed. We need the awakenings that bridge our fractured, hurried lives to something vast, whole and not wholly knowable. The learning that comes with these experiences enables us to see the holy in our midst. This is what the incarnation is all about. To the extent that we carry this awareness and the memory of such moments, our children will carry it too. The intensity of these visions can't be sustained—even by the likes of Moses and Paul. But the visions make us aware that our days are the altars of our lives. We can lavish wonder on them or spill the wastes of our distracted days. Hopefully we will become messengers of the heart, sending one another out into the world in new awareness of the other realm in which we move and are held.

God needs our witness to the holy, needs us to uphold the sacred in creation. Without our tangible gestures, our rituals and icons informed by faith and wonder, we'll again become mired in the realm of common sense, estranged from mystery by mere knowledge.

That New Year's Eve we were invited to the home of friends. While the adults polished off a curry supper, my son and his friend Perry enjoyed a scavenger hunt and a run of combat, then curled up to watch *101 Dalmatians* and *Benjamin Bunny*—a real bonanza for my video-starved child. By ten o'clock the children were limp

with exhaustion, and we found them tangled in sheets on the floor of Perry's bedroom. As I knelt down for a goodnight kiss, my son took my hand.

"Christmas is long, Mommy," he said, suddenly alert. "What are we going to do with all the years?"

After we get a good night's sleep, I told him, we'll be ready to watch for more sightings of the holy in the morning.