

The impossible possible

Feature

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We had not one but two baptisms the other day, and while there were many moving and entertaining moments therein—for example, one moppet squalling steadily in the key of C throughout the entire ceremony, a remarkable operatic performance, and the other child, as round of visage as the later Orson Welles, sleeping through the entire ceremony, not even flickering awake when the tall priest marked her with oil and then poured water into her tiny black Mohawk haircut—what absorbed me after a while was the way little kids edged toward the event like avid eager wasps to a summer picnic.

Yes, the tall priest had welcomed the children up to the altar, booming out his baritone invitation and waving his arms like railroad crossing gates, and a few kids

had shot up the aisle instantly like falcons with ponytails, and then a few more edged out from the wings of the church and sat down cross-legged and fascinated too, but it was the next few minutes that riveted me, for even as the priest went to work at the baptistery, and the parents and godparents stood there blinking and beaming, and several people in the congregation hummed along with the kid wailing steadily in the key of C, and I realized that the other baby looked exactly like Joe Strummer when he had a Mohawk in the last year the Clash were great, little kids kept edging out of the pews, and sliding surreptitiously toward the altar, and crouching behind the pillars at either side of the nave, and peering out amazed and delighted as the two babies were oiled and washed in the waters of the Lord.

I watched one boy, maybe age four, slip out of his pew and plaster himself against the wall, looking uncannily like a tiny cat burglar, and slowly slide along the wall toward the altar, grinning at those of us who grinned at him. I bet it took him five minutes to go 20 pews along that wall, but the priest was being expansive and garrulous and relaxed about pacing, so by the time the priest got to the actual baptizing of the squaller and the sleeper, the cat burglar had achieved the end of the wall, near the pillar where I counted four kids crouched and wary and absorbed.

Most essays about baptisms would pause here to say something piercing about baptism, and how clans and tribes have been christening their startled children in fresh clean water for a million years, and how gathering in community to bless a new being with prayer and laughter is a thing far bigger than the word *holy* can carry, and how what we mean by sacrament is so often exactly this sort of gathering to pray at a project launch, but I want to stay with the little kids running and tiptoeing and sneaking up on the sacred, and watching with awe, crouched behind the pillars, sitting cross-legged on the steps of the altar, and plastered to the wall where it ends near the chancel.

We all sprint or tiptoe toward the sacred, thrilled and hesitant and awed and skeptical, but unable to sustain cynicism or denial, for we know somehow somewhere deep inside that yes, there is sacred, and yes, there *are* miracles extant and possible far beyond our ken, and yes, we *are* shards and aspects of the divine in ways we will never understand, and yes, when we gather together some reminder, some gently opening window, some wriggle of stunning *is* possible; and that is why we go to church, isn't it? That is why we belong to religions, and attend services, and savor sacramental moments, because there might be a rush of sudden water that washes away despair and refills your hope capacitors when you thought they

were forever dust and echo. We are all small shy cat burglars edging toward the sacred, thrilled and scared; we are all that boy, unable to resist the impossible possible.