

Christmas Eve 2016

Luke 2:1-20

In the dark and quiet night,
The very young mother holds her newborn baby.
The generous and patient, older father
Tends to their needs
As best he can.

It is a tender scene,
Full of wonder and bewilderment.

Think of the hundreds,
Thousands of times this scene has been portrayed,
Retold,
Imagined,
In music,
In school pageants,
In crèches made of every conceivable material
From marble to felt
To buttercream to balsa wood.
From children's coloring pages
To the finest paintings and drawings
The world has seen,
Mary and Joseph
And the baby lying in a manger
Have imprinted themselves on our hearts and minds
And captivated our senses.

When we look at them,
We see in their faces
All our thoughts and feelings,
The hopes and fears of all our years.

We see love,
And joy, and wonder
And weariness and puzzlement and fear.
Hope. Peace.

And then there is trust.
I didn't used to think much about trust,
When I looked at these pictures.
But these days,
When so much seems uncertain,
When so many are troubled and afraid,

Trust seems to be what we most need,
And looks the hardest to find.

Trust gives us a home in the world.
Trust offers us freedom to be ourselves.
Trust makes a space where we can thrive.

Maybe you heard about this,
Or saw the video,
Or read the news story:
The man who announced to the world
That he was taking the risk to trust.

In the first days after the election,
When so many of us wondered what to do,
An Arab American man named Karim
Hand lettered a sign,
Took it to a street corner in New York,
Blindfolded himself,
And held up his sign.

There was a long message,
Which began,
My name is Karim,
And I am an Arab American.
Like many of us,
I am afraid.

He then invites passersby to approach him,
As he stands blindfolded,
And shake his hand, give him a hug,
Take selfies with him.

In the largest letters,
At the end,
He says,
I trust you.

If you watch the video
Of Karim –
Who, as it turns out,
Is the highly regarded tenor Karim Sulayman,
A native of Chicago,
Best known for his work in medieval and early renaissance music –
If you watch the video,
You wait with him

For some uncomfortable moments
While people stop, stare,
Point, take pictures.
Look like they might start to laugh or taunt him.

And then, one man comes forward
And very awkwardly shakes a couple of his fingers,
Wrapped around the sign.
This, too, of course,
Is an act of trust.
Then others come forward.
A young woman hugs him.
A young man shrugs,
Looks at his friends for affirmation,
And steps forward.
Then a young woman in a head scarf.
Then an older man.
A woman brings him a baby to kiss.
And on it goes.

Karim took a risk,
Made himself vulnerable,
And trusted that his fellow women and men and children
Would accept him,
Enfold him,
And validate his trust.

In taking that risk,
He offered up to others
A chance to connect,
To affirm our common humanity,
To stand against the forces
That threaten to divide us.

He trusted,
And that was a gift.

On this Christmas Eve,
Consider the gift of trust.

Trust is what God does,
A hundredfold,
A thousandfold and more,
In the mystery of the incarnation,
The ultimate gift of love.

God empties the fullness of the divine self
Into a human baby,
The most vulnerable and helpless of us all.
A baby born to poor parents
Who were far from home
And themselves dependent
On the kindness of strangers.

In every nativity scene,
God in the person of the little baby
Could be holding a sign that says,
I trust you.

I trust you to feed me.
I trust you to keep me safe.
I trust you to treasure me
And respect me and accept me as I am.

Did the risk pay off?
Were we worthy of the trust
God placed in us,
In emptying the divine self
Into a human baby,
Utterly vulnerable,
Completely dependent for life and health
And happiness
On the love and mercy and good faith
Of two faithful, generous, courageous,
but very human people,
Themselves vulnerable and marginalized?

Was this prudent?
To pour the fullness of the divine self
Into a helpless baby?
Was it wise?
Did it work?

Were we worthy of the trust?

We know how the story ends;
We know we betrayed God's trust
And killed the one who came among us.

But in this moment,
Every Christmas,
Lost in wonder

As we contemplate the baby in the manger,
We hope again.

We hope that this time
We might prove worthy of God's trust.
That we might find and shelter the baby
And offer comfort and companionship
To his young, prophetic mother
And his generous, righteous father.

We hope that this time
We will stand against all the forces
That threaten the vulnerable child.
That we will act on his behalf.

We hope that this time
We will recognize him
As he appears other forms,
As unlikely to us
As the baby in the manger was to those who first saw him.

God is always coming among us
And finding a place to live in our midst.
God is always offering the divine self
In new and mysterious ways,
Trusting us,
yet again,
despite all the evidence to the contrary,
trusting us this time
to accept and value and protect
and adore
what is placed in our frail and fallible hands.

I trust you,
God says over and over again.
I put myself in your hands.
I give myself away.
I take this risk with my eyes open,
Willingly,
Knowingly,
And, even after all this time,
In hope.

God is offering to trust you
With life itself.

Take a risk this Christmas.
Read the sign,
Step forward,
And embrace the one who has trusted you.
Accept the gift,
And then,
Become what you receive.