

Christmas invites us to **come hold the baby.**

My middle son and his wife had their first child on November 9th of this year - Benjamin Collins Candea. Because they also live in the Kansas City area, it has been very easy for me to stop in and spend time with my newest grandchild, which of course means, holding him. When I was having a particularly stressful day, discouraged and overwhelmed by not only my "to do" list, but also with the challenges facing the church that I cannot fix, my son sent me a text.

"Just come over and hold the baby, Mom."

While I held this precious little person in my arms, rocking him back and forth as he fell asleep, I felt a peace and calm come into and over me. Whatever else was happening in and around my life, in the church, and the world, here in this moment it was all about love. In my arms, I felt love – the incarnation of love in this tiny little body, who simply trusts and relaxes into my arms, somehow knowing that he is safe, that he is loved.



As I thought about the message I wanted to share with the synod, I realized this is what happens at Christmas. God comes down at Christmas, in the tiny body of the baby Jesus, so that we can hold love incarnate so that we can experience peace and calm so that we can know how deeply we are loved.

Whatever else is happening in our lives and in our world, it is about love.

I know that I am not the only one feeling stressed and overwhelmed. My prediction was that as we came out of this pandemic (although I'm not sure you can say we are coming out of the pandemic), it would be harder on congregations than at the beginning when we had to suspend in-person activities. All these months later, we are weary, discouraged, anxious, and fearful which can lead to divisiveness, negativity, blaming, and judging. We have lost our patience and tolerance with all the differences, all the discomfort, and the lack of control. It feels at times like our hearts have been hardened.

But God's heart has not. God comes and says to us, "just come and hold the baby, hold me as I hold you. Let my love heal you and bring you peace. Let my love soften your heart and make you feel safe. Let my love be what you hold not only in your arms, but in your words and actions."

I found the words to this Orthodox Christmas hymn by Alexander Bogolepov:

O my child, child of sweetness, how is it that I hold thee, Almighty? And how that I feed thee, who givest bread to all. How is it that I swaddle thee, who with the clouds encompasseth the whole earth?

How is it that we are able to hold this baby, this "word of God that became flesh and lived among us, . . . full of grace and truth." (John 1:14, 16).

That is the miracle of Christmas. That is what reminds us that we (not just I, but we) are **united with Christ in baptism**, meaning we are united to one another not in spite of our differences but because of our differences. This is what enables us to **travel the way of Jesus**, which is difficult in a world where it is easier to tear people down rather than truly listen, respect, and act with compassion. And this is what propels us to **join God's reign of justice and radical love in the world** so that others might know how deeply they are loved and feel the safety and comfort of being held by God.

So my prayer this Christmas for all of us is that we might come and hold the baby, letting the incarnate love of God hold and heal us.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Susan Candea".

Rev. Susan Candea, Bishop

