

I'm about to celebrate my fourth Christmas in America. I'm starting to feel very settled and America is starting to feel more of a home to me. I wouldn't say I'm completely there yet because every now and again something strange happens to remind me that I'm not from around here, that I'm a stranger in a strange land. Such a thing happened a couple of weeks ago. I was in my kitchen peeling vegetables. It was raining outside for the third day running. I was listening to KPBS on the radio. There was talk of Brexit, elections, civil unrest. I thought, well, actually this is pretty much like being back at England.

But then an announcement came on the radio that jolted me out of my comfort zone. It was an advertisement for some company, the name of which I've forgotten, that were selling matching pajamas for the whole family, including their pets. I was suddenly prompted to remember that this is indeed a strange land to me. No sensible person in England would ever seek to dress like their dog. Now I realize I have to be careful here as there's no doubt someone sitting in the congregation this evening who went to bed last night wearing the same pajamas as their pooch, so I'll move on. I have had the same experience in other places, like Von's.

I can wander around the aisles there, thinking that I'm in an English supermarket. I'll pick out the cheddar cheese, the All Brand, the Gordon's Gin. But then I'd get to the checkout and all of a sudden I'm reminded that I'm a long way from home. In England, the business at the checkout would be conducted largely in silence, certainly without eye contact. But here, how strange, the person at the checkout will inquire as to how my day is going and almost sound as if they are genuinely interested. I'll manage to grunt something in reply and then they'll start asking you if I have any plans for the weekend, as if they're going to come and join me. I still find this level of enthusiasm and familiarity strange and rather disconcerting. I say all this as I want to make a case for keeping Christmas strange.

Much of us, well, many of us, have Christmas celebrations that are comfortable in their familiarity. We like to do the same things every year. We hear the story of the nativity every year, that sweet story of the baby born in a manger, that becomes part of the familiarity of the season. The story can easily lose its strangeness. The painters of the Renaissance were alive to this danger when they mastered the art of portraying

Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus in a stable in a compellingly naturalistic way. They realized they didn't want the viewer to think that this was just an ordinary birth, that this was an ordinary baby. So they devised ways of making the image strange. They found ways of making strange the scene that lies at the heart of our Christmas celebrations, which is of God come amongst us in human form.

The baby Jesus is called Emmanuel, God with us, as the hymn writer says, "Veiled in flesh, the God had seen. Hail the incarnate deity." When we think of God, our minds so easily turn to images of power and might. Yet, in this Christmas season, we celebrate God made known as a vulnerable human baby. God in the arms of his mother, weak and reliant on his family. It's a strange thought, a strange thought in the midst of a comfortable, familiar story. So let's, this Christmas, keep Christmas strange. Amen.