

Even though I have absolutely no training as a behavioral specialist, no one could convince me otherwise—animals sense things! Take stress for example. In a September 2022 study conducted by psychologists from Queen’s University in Belfast, with a high degree of accuracy, dogs could discriminate between human breath and sweat samples taken at baseline and when they were experiencing psychological stress. Their noses know!

Service dogs for those with anxiety, panic attack disorders and PTSD are growing in popularity and the results of these studies only confirm that trained dogs are able to many conditions by their amazing sense of smell.¹ Even a passage from sacred scripture appears to back this up. The prophet Isaiah notes that an ox knows its owner and a donkey its master’s manger, while also relating that Israel has not understood. (cf. 1:3) In other words, we’re slower (dumber!) than oxen and donkeys!

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| O magnum mysterium | O great mystery, |
| et admirabile sacramentum | and wonderful sacrament, |
| ut animalia viderent Dominum natum ² | that animals should see the newborn Lord, |
| iacentem in praeseptio! | lying in a manger! |
| Beata Virgo, cujus viscera | Blessed is the virgin whose womb |
| meruerunt portare | was worthy to bear |
| Dominum Christum | the Lord, Jesus Christ. |
| Alleluia! | Alleluia! |

This text was incorporated in mediaeval times into Matins, the extended vigil of prayer on Christmas Eve that began near midnight. The text was appropriately followed by the opening words of the Hail Mary. And this brings us to Christmas and the stable! Jesus was gently placed in manger. Made of clay mixed with straw, or from stones held together with mud, simply put, a manger is an animal feed trough. And that, brothers and

¹ Wilson C, Campbell K, Petzel Z, Reeve C (2022): “Dogs can discriminate between human baseline and psychological stress condition odours.” Link here: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0274143>

² "nascor, nasci, natus" ("to be born") Thus, here, natus is deponent in form, but it also is interestingly intransitive and passive in its meaning (i.e., it does not mean "bear" but rather "to be born").

sisters, is how salvation entered into our world. While certainly not as cold in Bethlehem as it has been here lately, surviving outside in the low 40's F is not exactly a cake walk. But for a woman preparing to give birth, it must have been frightening beyond words. With outstanding medical care at our fingertips, do we even begin to appreciate the challenges that the Blessed Virgin Mary faced?

The answer can only be a resounding "No." Yet, she trusted that the Lord's promises to her would be fulfilled, even as the divine drama played out in a most inauspicious place. "O great mystery and wonderful sacrament, that animals should see the newborn Lord." So, what did the animals see? Or whom? Could we learn a lesson from the manger?

If your family has a pet, you've noticed how they sometimes stare out the window. While it may be just a squirrel, sometimes it turns out to be someone arriving whom you could neither see nor hear. We humans readily pride ourselves on our achievements and progress, yet we remain mired in conflict. We ignore inequities all around us, be they economic, educational or of a health-related nature.

We have drifted from our traditional societal moorings. Based upon our high levels of stress, depression and growing concerns with drug abuse, nothing seems to have taken its place. We cannot see the salvation right before our eyes. Is it really such a stretch to think that the animals may have intuited something that night? We gaze upon our newborn Savior with the eyes of faith. May we be granted the grace to be captivated by that gaze, seeing therein the source of our happiness and joy.

May this Christmas call forth the wonder and awe experienced by the shepherds and yes, even the animals in Bethlehem. May that wonder fill our hearts with joy and may we carry that joy to the ends of the earth.