

## **Incarnate Joy**

Christmas Eve Homily by Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Part of our work in the church is to teach Christians how to practice their faith at home, or at work, or at school-- not only during the hour they spend in the sanctuary worshipping God. So this year, we decided to bring back the tradition of the Traveling Jesus: a gift bag, with a little baby doll Jesus, wrapped in swaddling clothes. The Traveling Jesus comes with a couple of picture books about Jesus' birth, and a journal, in which children and their parents can tell about hosting Jesus with words, drawings and photos. This simple activity cultivates a place in the imagination where children can wonder about Jesus, and he can begin to take up space in the stories that occupy their minds. The bag has passed hands from family to family in our church this Advent. The last family to host the Traveling Jesus let me know that their daughter reported back to her parents that the little baby Jesus was a girl. "Jesus was a boy," her mother gently corrected. "No," the girl replied confidently, "I'm pretty sure baby Jesus is a girl."

History does not tell us the exact year Jesus was born, but we know from both the bible and from independent secular historians that Jesus lived, and that he was male. Scholars have split hairs over what can be proven about Jesus' life and teachings, and some of these studies I find truly fascinating. But the most important aspect of Jesus' identity is something that a child hosting a \$5 plastic Jesus doll in a bag is somehow beginning to grasp in a way that the best exegetical scholars sometimes cannot. A little girl hosting Jesus in a bag for half a week decided Jesus is like her: a girl. She sensed in this imaginative family exercise something our historical Confessions struggle to explain using words: that for us and our salvation, God came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and of Mary, and became truly human. God came to share our common lot, to be one of us, Emmanuel, God *with* us. The intimacy this little girl felt as she cared for

this little plastic baby Jesus is the beginning of a sense of connection with and care for a Jesus who is so much bigger and more profound than what a toy figurine can symbolize, or than what we can even imagine. This is a Jesus she may come to know as the cosmic, eternal Christ.

When we meet God in that place of initial connection, that moment when God decides to put some skin in the game and experience our lives on a vulnerable, human level, we see the deep and personal love God has for us. God knows what it is to be born, to know fear and to know the comfort of human touch. In Jesus, we see God experience what it is to make friends and to lose a friend, to be seen as a leader and hated as an outcast, to be born and to die. In Jesus' life story there is a broad palette God uses to know us, God's creatures, more deeply.

What would it mean for us to seek God with the same depth and intimacy that God felt when choosing to experience human form? Do we die and become born again in holy skin? I suspect the experience is much closer than that. A Jewish tradition teaches to welcome the stranger as if he or she could be the Messiah. Jews are still waiting on their Messiah; Christians believe he has already come. But Jesus did not come as a one-time historical event; every year, every Christmas, he is born again in the manger and continues to be born in you, in me, and also in the people who do not look or act just like us: in the foreign face of a stranger, in the crippled body of an elder, in the joyful face of a child, in the shell-shocked face of a refugee. Jesus is among us and is already looking to find you. Can we in turn look to find, and welcome, him? He is among us. What wonder, what joy. Amen.