



"It's a Girl!"

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Hayward, California*

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Luke 2:1-12 (NRSV)*

A couple of years ago, Eden Church began the practice of including a live nativity and an instant pageant in our Christmas Eve services. The first year we tried this stunt we recycled the set and costumes from the children's Christmas pageant, which included a chicken and a mouse costume. The actors sat on chairs instead of hay bales, and we gave the part of baby Jesus to a doll.

When people asked me what was up with the chicken and the mouse at the manger, I just recited our UCC motto, "Whoever you are, wherever you are on life's journey. You're welcome here!"

Last year we upgraded to more elaborate costumes, real hay, and a live baby. Sam Jarvis played the part of baby Jesus. He was perfectly adorable. He smiled and cooed through the whole service, while his adoring grandmothers sat in the front row and snapped pictures of him. As long as I live, Sam will be forever "Sammy Baby Jesus" to me.

Sammy Baby Jesus raised the bar in terms of expectations around the theatre of this service. Weeks ago, people began asking me who was going to be baby Jesus this year. Those close to the situation noted that the regulars in the nursery were all girls.

Hmm, I thought to myself, not a problem!

Eden Church, in fact, the United Church of Christ (our parent denomination) is an Equal Opportunity, Affirmative Action Employer.

Our congregation is 145 years old and grew out of the Congregational tradition, which ordained the first Protestant African American pastor (Lemuel Haynes) in 1785, the first female pastor (Antoinette Brown) in 1853, and the first openly gay pastor (William R. Johnson) in 1972.

Surely, I thought to myself, we can roll with a female baby Jesus!

II

Time marched on and eventually a decision needed to be made.

One Tuesday in the middle of November, as I explained what an instant pageant was to our new music director, Lee (I mean, “Joseph”), he asked, “So who’s going to be the baby Jesus this year, I haven’t seen too many baby boys in the nursery?”

“Well,” I said, “how about Nora?”

“Are you sure that you want a girl to be baby Jesus?” he asked.

“Yes.” I said.

So here we are.

Imagine if you will, first century Palestine, an unwed mother in the final trimester of pregnancy, and she and her betrothed pressing on toward Jerusalem in an effort to satisfy the governor’s census.

They stop along the way in a remote village called Bethlehem. Maybe they chose this place because they knew that all the rooms would be taken in Jerusalem. Maybe they thought they could get a cheaper room in Bethlehem, or maybe they just couldn’t go another step.

You know the story. There was no room at the inn. They were shown to a stable. At least they could get out of the weather and be safe for the night. And there in the stable, in a place barely fit for livestock, their first child was born. And it was a girl!

III

We are not the first to imagine a female Jesus.

I recall that while I was in college an artist created a sculpture of a female Jesus on a cross. The piece, known as “Christa,” was on exhibit in Chicago. The feminists were enthused. The pope was not amused. And the fundamentalist were protesting the exhibit. If I could have scraped together the gas money in those days, I would have driven down to Chicago to see both the exhibit and the protests, and I might have launched a counter protest.

The women I exercise with on Thursday mornings inquired a couple of weeks ago about whether we would be hosting another live nativity tonight. I said, “Absolutely.”

They too had noticed the staffing challenge that was before me, and said, “So who’s going to be baby Jesus this year?”

“Nora Steward,” I explained.

“Wow, a girl!” they said.

“Yes, a girl,” I said, and quickly added, the title of my homily is, “It’s a girl!”

“Wonderful,” someone said. They were all smiles.

Contemporary theologian Barbara Ryken, who was with us that day, reminded us that the idea of a female Jesus was nothing new. She remembered that the divine feminine was all the rage in Berkeley, when she and her husband Steve were in college.

“So what do you think about a female Jesus?” I asked Barbara.

Wisely, she said something like this, “I think Jesus could have been anybody, but God probably had to make him a ‘he’ in order to get people to pay attention to him back then. Who would have listened to a woman in those days? Who would have seen Jesus as a religious authority, if ‘he’ were a ‘she’?”

IV

Barbara made a good point. While there certainly are several feminine, and gender neutral names and metaphors for God in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) and while there were several other ancient near eastern religions that worshiped female deities, the ancient Hebrew prophets clearly envisioned a masculine messiah, and given the patriarchal influences on our Judeo-Christian religion, it’s pretty clear that feminine figures and women’s influence was muted in ancient times.

It’s also pretty clear that Jesus was a Jewish male, and that many Christian traditions have extrapolated from Jesus’ gender identity that maleness is a requirement for leadership in the church and society. Ironically, these same traditions have not made Jewish heritage a requirement for leadership.

Unlike more conservative traditions, progressive Christians like us believe that Christmas is primarily about divine incarnation not about Jesus’ gender identity. Christmas is about God loving the world so much and wanting to live in relationship with human beings, in a way that we could understand, that God came in the form of an infant to share our common lot.

Bluntly stated, Christmas is fundamentally about God’s presence in our lives, not about the “package” in which Jesus was delivered. Therefore, we do not have to be male or Jewish, in our early 30s or single, or whatever to be fit to receive God’s presence or to be Christ’s disciples. The God we worship is an Equal Opportunity, Affirmative Action Employer. We only need to be the person who God made us to be, and to play the unique part that God has called us to play.

V

Friends, believe the good news of the gospel: the stage is already set. There isn't a formal script for life, because life itself is an instant pageant.

The parts that we're called to play are the characters that God made us to be.

Each of our expression of the incarnation will differ, and yet together, by God's grace, we can proclaim the hope, peace, joy, and the love of Christ, who came once for all, more than two thousand years ago tonight.

I hope you enjoy the show.

Merry Christmas.

Amen.