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Behold, does your infant have what it takes to play Baby Jesus?

All is calm - except for the Christmas pageant casting director in search of a newborn to play the Holy Infant.



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Alessandro Tiarini's "Nativity of Jesus," a mid-17th century, oil on copper, Collection of the Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy

by Elise Seyfried, For Philly.com
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If you are expecting a baby during the early fall, and you spy a determined middle-aged woman lurking nearby, fear not! I only want to sign your baby up to play Jesus in our church Christmas pageant.

Our church had always used a plastic doll for Baby Jesus, until I took the helm of our Yuletide spectacle 15 years ago. Plastic indeed! Our nativity would be LIVE, right down to the gurgling infant playing the Lord and Savior!

It has since been my annual duty to keep tabs on all the pregnant women in our congregation and community, in hopes of securing the services of their newborns to play the coveted role of the tiny Messiah. These ladies have to deliver between September and November, and I have been VERY disappointed by the poor planning of some of our families. Babies in July? What in the world were they thinking?

This is a very popular gig, as you can imagine, with all the glitz and glamour you would expect from a suburban Philadelphia Lutheran church: The baby's name printed in the bulletin! Sometimes spelled correctly! Complimentary swaddling blanket and pacifier! A 20-minute stint lying in a wooden cradle on a stone floor! What newborn could ask for more?

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It is a great part for young aspiring actors: in the spotlight through the whole show, with no lines to learn and no rehearsals to attend. I only ask that they be suitably dressed: solid color onesies, with no pictures of zoo animals or "clever" sayings on them ("Mommy and Daddy walked to Bethlehem and all I got was this lousy T-shirt.")

Looking back down Memory Lane, I reminisce about our Jesuses gone by. There was the 4-month-old who rocked so hard that she almost tipped over the cradle. There was the 5-week-old who slept through the whole thing, even the unforgettable trombone and xylophone rendition of "We Three Kings." There were the twins (Jesus and a spare; we switched them out when one became fussy). We've had an African American Jesus, and several Catholics when the Lutheran supply ran low. We welcome diversity, as (no joking here) this is the God we worship.

In our version of the Christmas story, B.J. is carried from the back of the church, down the center aisle, up two stone steps, to the cradle. The carrier is the "Head Angel," who is usually a middle schooler. It's a long,

perilous journey for the pair, and my heart is always in my throat (especially on those stone steps). We've always been very lucky, and the Holy Infant has made it safely to the manger. When the occasional Head Angel has appeared in church wearing heels, I make her walk barefoot, which when you think about it, is more authentic anyway, right?

Well, last year MY son and daughter-in-law DID plan ahead. Peter was born Sept. 23, perfect timing. No more stalking Motherhood Maternity, or sending out flyers through the nursery school. I had my own home-grown Son of Man! I found myself being even more protective than usual because he is mine. I briefly thought of running background checks and getting fingerprints for last year's Head Angel, but decided that might be a tad excessive. I did put extra padding in the cradle to make it more comfy, and when he fussed I personally picked him up, even leaving the pulpit in mid-sermon to do so.

This year we have a preemie, the son of a previous Mary (circa 2002). He is a tiny guy, and so I have paired him with an older Head Angel, an experienced babysitter. I anticipate another stressful Christmas Eve, watching them make their way to the altar. But I imagine the first Christmas Eve was too. I picture a cold Middle Eastern night, the pungent smell of animals in a stable. A hay-filled manger. A frightened young mother, giving birth to a very special baby in a far less-than-ideal setting.

And so our 16th annual Jesus is born again, into a world that badly needs blessing. May we be in a much better place when I cast the Lord for December 2018. May we sort out the craziness that keeps us from recognizing we are all family (dysfunctional though we may be). May we look into the eyes of the tiny person representing God, and promise this little one, and all of us, a brighter tomorrow.

In this harrowing, hectic, holy season, God bless us, every one.

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