

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta, GA
December 19, 2021
Advent III –*Baby Doll Auditions*
The Rev Dr. Jim Pace

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I am going to depart from the usual manner of preaching from the Gospel appointed for today in order to pay tribute to a dear and wonderful friend. However, IF there is even one person who may feel that they missed the opportunity to hear today's Gospel preached, I did write a separate sermon that has already been posted for you!

When I was teaching at Emory, I was an interim priest at St. Clement's Episcopal Church in Canton GA, just north of Atlanta. I worked with a Perpetual Deacon there: The Rev. Lucy Martinez. Lucy and I got along beautifully. She would preach every so often and her sermons were always well received. On Advent 3 in 1997, she preached a sermon entitled *Baby Doll Auditions*. People loved it. As a matter of fact, it became a tradition to preach *Baby Doll Auditions* every Advent 3. My dear friend Lucy died three weeks ago, may she rest in eternal glory. Many mourn her loss as do I.

And so, in her honor, and as a loving tribute, I present to you: *Baby*

Doll Auditions. [NOTE: It was originally written by Father Brian Black of the Church of the Advent in Madison, GA. It is the story of grace-filled moments and it always gives a deeper meaning to our Advent journey.... perhaps in a way like none other.]

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On the fourth Sunday of Advent, the children in the kindergarten Sunday School class were having Baby Doll Auditions. They were asked on that Sunday to bring their favorite dolls, and from those dolls, one would be chosen to play the part of the baby Jesus laying in a manger for the Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve.

I was fairly new at the parish and was given the honor of being invited to the class that morning for the purpose of choosing the doll that would play the part.

Sounded easy enough for a priest, I thought.

At 10 in the morning I entered Mrs. Jones' class to find a group of 10 or 12 children sitting on little chairs with their dolls in

their laps. They were all hoping that their doll would be the one to have the honor of playing the part of baby Jesus.

As I looked around the room, I was surprised to see the saddest group of dolls *I have ever seen* gathered together in one room. The kids looked like worried parents bouncing their children on their knees in the waiting room of the pediatrician's office.

Megan was holding her doll, Bessy, a cabbage patch doll with the original clothes she had on when she was adopted at the K-Mart three years ago. Bessy's clothes had never been washed, and Megan was proud of that.

Lisa held her doll, Thelma. Thelma had very short, matted, bright orange hair. Her hair had been long at one time, *and brown*, until one day when Lisa decided to play beauty parlor with Thelma. After Thelma had her hair cut, she had it shampooed with an abundance of Clorox Bleach.

Melanie brought "Angel," her favorite doll. One of Angel's eyes wouldn't open, and the other eye wouldn't close. One of her

arms was missing. Melanie told me Angel had lost the arm in an elevator accident at the mall.

Karl, the only boy in the room, brought his GI Joe with him that Sunday morning. GI Joe was as nude as a J-Bird, and his head was full of teeth marks, the result of an argument with a dog.

As I sat there scanning the dolls and the kids holding them, Mrs. Jones piped in: “Perhaps if you children could tell Fr. Brian why you think your doll is the best choice to be the baby Jesus, it will make it easier for him to decide.”

One little girl piped right up: “My doll stays awake while I’m asleep at night and scares off bad stuff.”

“My dolly is the best friend in the whole world,” said another. “When no one is around, she plays school with me.”

Another little girl spoke up and said, “She helps me cry when I’m sad, and whispers happy things in my ear.”

I sat there in awe and wonder listening to what these kids were saying, watching the dolls in their laps **come to life** before my eyes.

I don't know if you've read the story of The Velveteen Rabbit, but what the kids were saying reminded me of an often-quoted scene in the book when a toy rabbit and a toy horse are talking to each other.....

What is real?” asked the rabbit one day, as they were lying side by side. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick out handle?”

“Real isn't how you are made,” said the skin horse. “It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, *then* you become real.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the skin horse for he was always truthful.

“But when you are real, you *don't mind being* hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”

“It doesn't happen all at once,” said the skin horse. “You become. It takes a long time. Generally, by the time you are real,

most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out, and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't really matter at all, because once you are real, you can't be ugly except to the people who don't understand."

All of the dolls that came to Sunday School that morning in hopes of playing the part of baby Jesus were definitely well loved and very real! They had been hugged, kissed, drooled on, colored with crayons and markers, run over by tricycles and wagons, and dragged through mud puddles and tears. They were all stained and marked and smothered in love.

"Well now let me see," I said as I looked about the room, "Whose doll will play baby Jesus this Christmas?"

All the kids were sitting on the edge of their seats with their hearts beating, wanting ever so badly to have their doll chosen to be the one.

"This is such a difficult decision," I confessed to them, "they all would be a wonderful Christ Child. Perhaps if I could see what they looked like lying in the manger it would be much easier to

decide.” So, I led the kids with their dolls into the sanctuary. One by one they took turns carefully placing their dolls into the manger.

When they had finished, I told them that I had made my decision. But before I announced the winner, I explained to them that their doll would need to stay in the manger during the two weeks of the Christmas Season.

The kids hadn't thought about that. And from the looks on their faces I could see that their expressions had changed as they thought about the long nights in bed without their best friend, or those long lonely rainy days with no one to play with. Not to mention how lonely the doll would be in the big scary and empty church for so long a time.

All of a sudden, the dolls were being held tightly against little chests, and I was getting hateful looks from them that said, “Don't you dare choose my doll!”

I announced the winner—Thelma. But Lisa declined. I announced the second runner up, but she also declined. Finally, I

simply begged for someone to volunteer their doll for the part— with no response. Even GI Joe declined.

Sweat broke out on my forehead. I envisioned an empty manger in the church on Christmas Eve. What I thought was going to be an enjoyable and easy task of choosing a doll was quickly turning into a nightmare!

I looked to Mrs. Jones with a panicked look. She quickly picked up on my desperation. “Don’t worry,” she said, “it happens every year.”

Then she went to the sacristy and came out with a doll already wrapped in swaddling clothes by a loving and all-knowing altar guild. “Do you think this doll would work?” she asked her class. They all gave overwhelming approval.

“But you know,” she said to the class as she placed the doll in the manger, “I still think all of your dolls would make a wonderful Christ Child. We therefore commission all of your dolls to play the part of the Baby Jesus this Christmas. But they don’t need to stay here. They belong at home with you. So, take your

friends home with you. Hold them close and tightly in your arms and in your hearts, and they can still be the baby Jesus. Because that's what the real baby Jesus would want. To be taken home to live with you in your home, to be your friend, and to be close to your hearts. He wants to be there when you're frightened or lonely. He wants to share his love with you in a very real way."

When the class was over, all the kids marched out with their honorary baby Jesus in their arms, and smiles on their faces.

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Advent is all about preparing a special place in our hearts for the Christ Child, about bringing him home with us, to hold him closely and tightly in our hearts, so that he may be with us when we are frightened or lonely, to share in his love and happiness.

And the wonder of it all is.... Jesus keeps coming to us again and again.... not only at Christmas, but also daily, in grace-filled moments like these!

Thank you, Lucy.

Amen.