Did Jesus ever have cavities?
Did he get the stomach flu? Diarrhea?
Did he experience being hangry – that emotion
    when you are hungry and tired and annoyed by
    the people around you that
    you just get hungry-angry?

As a kid – did he ever feel left out?

Was he ever embarrassed?
Did he have regrets?
Maybe have one too many glasses of wine?
Did Jesus ever feel nostalgic?
Or did he ever belly laugh so hard that he cried?

Did he excel at being a carpenter?
    Could he have made a good living doing this?
Did he understand heaven? Or hell?
    Could Jesus have thought the earth was flat?\(^i\)

The Incarnation.
It’s something we talk about in church life all the time
but rarely dive deeply into because it’s incredibly complicated.
God, loving humanity so much to be born into it.

The incarnation is as beautiful as it is mysterious.

It is the place where God meets us and we meet God.

*       *       *

In a sermon in 396, Augustine preached about the incarnation, trying to help his early church congregation understand this theological concept:

(He said) How do we comprehend the…
“one who holds the world
being laid in a manger;
Jesus was simultaneously a speechless infant
and the Word.
The heavens cannot contain him;
a woman carried him in her bosom.
Mary was ruling our ruler.”

*       *       *

God becoming human is nothing that the world had ever seen before.

God, making the decision,
to come down from a throne of power to
a family without wealth or status,
to live with skin and bones
and blood and eyes
and all that makes us human

is a decision to become vulnerable.
The letter to the Philippians describes this act of God in this way:

Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
   And being found in human form,
   he humbled himself and became obedient
   to the point of death— even death on a cross.

This is one of our earliest creeds.
The church has been working through this incarnation for thousands of years.

The incarnation is our theology.
   And it’s history.
      It’s geography and economics and politics.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in Palestine.
   To Mary and Joseph.

And we believe that God came to us through this unlikely event of childbirth in a barn to poor, teenage parents.

Jesus was born when there was a census being taken,
when there was danger of political revolution.
   God came to us in a real time and place
   where people were struggling with power in the world.

*          *          *          *

A few years ago the St. Petersburg Times published a newspaper on Christmas Day that said,
“In keeping with the Christmas spirit, only good news will appear on the front page. For a full report on the other happenings around the world, see page 3A.”

Sure enough, on the front page there was
  a picture of the pope,
  a story of a family helping another family in need,
  and Santa Claus stretched out on a patio, soaking in Florida sun.
Then the rest of the news, starting on page 3A:
  freedom fighters in Cuba in retreat,
  gunfire in Chicago,
  a family of nine dying in a house fire,
  civil war in the Congo,
  and assorted tragedies from around the globe.

Steve Seamands stood up in a pulpit with that newspaper the following week to counter the well-intentioned newspaper editor, saying that he missed the point of Christmas: ‘Jesus the Son of God, (he preached) wasn’t born into a sentimental, good-news-only-fantasy world.
  He was born into this world, our world,
  which was evil and dangerous then just as it is now.”

* * * * *

Jesus came into the world 2000 years ago and he is here in the world with us today.
  Jesus wasn’t a one-time thing.
  He isn’t a one-time thing…
but sometimes we want him to be.

And the church structures the Incarnation that way.

We read the birth stories
and have kids in pageants
as we celebrate baby Jesus.

A sentimental infant that we ooh an ahh over…

*that* is the last thing the Incarnation was meant to be.

We do the Incarnation a disservice by putting these texts just at Jesus’ birth.
The Incarnation is Jesus living out his whole life.
The Gospel writers get to Jesus’ ministry -
his teaching
and healing and praying
and being with people – as quickly as possible.

The Doctrine of the Incarnation, according to Will Willimon,
“is our attempt to make sense out of an event that
has happened and *is still happening* – heaven and earth
overlapping, interlocking in a Jew from Nazareth who
lived briefly and died violently.
Then three days later, the women shout, ‘He’s back!’
God here. God now.”

God now is a challenge to us.
God now means that God is *not* on a throne,
dealing out of power,
delegating work to the minions,
watching from afar.

God now is God who takes risks.
God who shows up in the unexpected.

God, overflowing with love for creation,
humbling God’s self to become Jesus of Nazareth,
a person who lived life on this earth,
   experiencing the great joys and
   and the deepest pains
   friendship and betrayal
   exhaustion and rest
hope and disappointment.
   It’s God coming to be with us.
Not just to do something for us.
   But to sit with us.
   To pray with us.
   To laugh and cry and rejoice and suffer.
To teach us and warn us and
shake his head at our crazy and
affirm our insight and wisdom.

* * * * *

“When I was first taught the concept [of the Incarnation],
I was taught to capitalize it,” writes Barbara Brown Taylor.
   Not a lower case “i” but a proper noun, capital “I.”
Because I was taught “the Incarnation happened just once,
in one person, a very long time ago.
The Incarnation was presented to me as an article of faith. It was a unique event that involved Jesus and no one else, and the fate of my own flesh depended on my acceptance of that fact.”

What if the Incarnation is actually less a doctrine than a Christian practice of discipleship?

Something that Jesus came, not to do once and for all, but to show any of us who want to follow how God’s word might become flesh in our own lives? iv

* * *

In 1930, Zilphia Mae Johnson got a new minister in her Presbyterian church in Arkansas. His name was Claude Williams.

Williams ministry, though very effective by most ministry standards – a growing congregation with passionate, faithful people, - only lasted five years as he spent much of his time stressing the need for the church members to live and be in solidarity with victims of social injustice.

Sitting in the pews, twenty-year-old Zilphia was struck by what she heard. The daughter of a coal-mining superintendent, she wondered about the gap between her affluent upbringing
and the life of those working in the mine
down the street that paid for all her expensive
music lessons growing up.

In 1934, she joined Williams and a group of church folks
in an effort to unionize her father’s coal mine.

“Her father told her that she had to stop going to Claude
Williams’s church,
and if she didn’t
he was going to throw her out of the house.
She ignored [her father]
and he disowned her.”

But Zilphia got a taste of what it looked like to take her faith out into the world
and she wanted to keep making a difference.

Having been a music lover her whole life with training and a degree in classical music,
she headed off to Highlander Folk School with the hopes of using her great passion in service of social justice.

There, she took the church and the message of Jesus,
and figured out how to preach it in a way that met the needs of the people around her.

She played a major role in taking a hymn she had sung in church and, by adding verses and changing the tempo,
turning it into the now iconic anthem of the civil rights movement, “We Shall Overcome.”
Like Fannie Lou Hammer,
singing “This Little Light of Mine,” outside the Democratic National Convention in 1964,
where Hammer was fighting for all Americans,
regardless of race,
to receive the right to vote,
Zilphia Johnson took the faith she learned by following Jesus,
and, went out in the world to proclaim hope and peace for all people.

She lived the incarnation.
Not convinced it existed.
But letting God get inside her life and move her.

Jesus came to be with us.
This has implications everyday for us.

And Jesus teaches us and shows us what it means to be with others.

Things that, if enacted,
will help us live out the Word in our own lives.

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”
“Forgive, not up to 7 times, but up to 70 times 7”
“If anyone takes your coat, offer up your shirt.”

“Consider the lilies, how they grow.”
“Let your light shine before others so that they may praise God.”
“Do not worry, saying, ‘what will we eat or drink?’ but strive for the Kingdom of God.

Jesus gives us things we can embody. Ways we can be light in the world.

* * * *

In the projects of L.A., there is a church that decided to open its doors to homeless immigrants during the week. Every night, homeless, undocumented workers would sleep in the church.

On Sundays, the priest and some of the dedicated women of the congregation would come early and do everything they could to eliminate the SMELL the men left behind.

They’d sprinkle “Love My Carpet” all over and then vacuum like crazy.

They’d spray about a case of Lysol all over.

They’d put scented candles and bowls of potpourri in strategic places.

They’d burn incense.

But the smell persisted and, church being church--people grumbled.

Finally, in worship one day, the priest decided to face the problem head on.
During the sermon, he asked the congregation a question:
“What does the church smell like?”

People were mortified.
Eye contact ceased.
women started searching their purses for who knows what.

“Come on,” the priest said, “What’s it smell like?”

Finally, an older man who never cared what people thought anyway, called out, “Smells like feet!”

“Exactly,” the priest replied. “And WHY does it smell like feet?”

“Because many homeless men slept here last night,” a woman answered.

“Why did we let that happen?” asked the priest.

“It’s what we committed to do,” said someone else.

“And why would we commit to that?” asked the priest.

“…Because it’s what Jesus would do,” someone said.

“Well then,” the priest asked, “what does the church smell like now?”
“It smells like commitment,” one man called out.
“IT smells like roses!” another woman shouted,
and then everyone in that place laughed and cheered…
…like a church who knew WHO they were, and were clear on WHERE they were headed.\textsuperscript{vi}

\*

Frederick Buechner has said that,
\begin{quote}
“One of the blunders religious people are particularly fond of making is the attempt to be more spiritual than God.”\textsuperscript{vii}
\end{quote}

The incarnation has as much, if not more, to do with a sanctuary that smells like feet than it does a church doctrine we can explain.

We are called.
All of us.
To let the doctrine of the Incarnation become a daily expression of the incarnation.
A daily experience of God,
in the good and the bad,
in need and the abundance,
in the dark moments and the bright ones.

In the coming weeks and months you will have big Sunday like Palm Sunday and Easter, And ordinary Sundays like this 2\textsuperscript{nd} Sunday after Christmas.

Sundays of partings and, in the not too distant future, a Sunday of welcome for a new pastor.

You’ll have Sunday’s where you’ll be in sync with \textit{everything} in worship
And ones where you are just waiting to get out to lunch.

You’ll have days in the congregation where everything is fitting together great

And other days where nothing is fitting quite as well as you think it should.

Through the tears and laughter, the sighs and joys, God does not differentiate.

God’s incarnation does not differentiate.

God wants to be everywhere, with everyone, doing everything.

With you, me, this church, this city, this world – living out the Gospel, doing what Jesus did. Caring, serving, feeding, living, dying, praying, and being together.

The incarnation – that is our calling. To live out the incarnation every day, everywhere.

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i Legare Hartbarger helped me come up with this list when she came to the church on Wednesday, December 30th, 2015.
iii Will Willimon, Incarnation, xii
v encyclopediainfoarkansas.net, folksongs, Zilphia Mae Johnson Horton
vi story edited from Greg Boyle, Tattoos on the Heart, 73-74
vii Frederick Buechner, originally published in Wishful Thinking, http://frederickbuechner.com/content/incarnation-0