

O holy night at the clothes closet

By [Melodie Miller Davis](#)

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I held a five-month-old Iraqi child in my lap for almost a half hour last week. Any long-distance grandma knows how we ache to hold our own grandchildren, and leap at any opportunity to snuggle another woman's child or grandchild.

The [clothes closet our church runs](#) was busier than ever, since it was the last time we'd be open before Christmas. We had more than 50 people, counting infants and children. We'd planned a special evening: candy canes or peppermint patties for all, our guitarist quietly strumming Christmas carols on his guitar from the back of the room. Hence we were a little short on help—so the on-duty mission leader, Jim, asked if I would see that the little kids were occupied. The guitarist, John, was the one who usually got out the crayons and old computer paper for the younger kids to scribble on.

I soon noticed that a young Iraqi girl was in charge of her little brother, a five-month-old in a car seat. He wasn't having any of it, starting to squirm and whimper and looking quite unhappy to be jostled around as she swung the car seat into a somewhat safer position on the floor. It didn't take me long to ask her if I could hold the baby. She nodded and I was in heaven. But would he just keep crying with me, a stranger, trying to comfort him?

I centered him on my knee and wiggled it a bit, and he seemed to get happier. Soon he had forgotten his troubles and was watching all the preschoolers getting their paper and crayons. All he seemed to care about was that at least he wasn't in his car seat anymore.

I soon started asking ages and schools of the children. Then I got brave enough to ask the big sister, who was nine, which country they were from: Iraq. I'd suspected as much. Their mother wore a Muslim headscarf; our client base is equally split among immigrants from the Middle East, immigrants from Latin America, and U.S.-born people.

Finally, I stood the boy up so I could look him in the face and he could see me, too, and get used to the idea that it was a stranger holding him. He was now smiling. I looked at his black hair, his dark eyes, his olive skin, and it didn't take much to imagine that this would have been much more what the baby Jesus looked like than the babies in all those Christmas pageants in my mostly lily-white church experience.

When I looked at his nine-year-old sister, I also thought immediately of baby Moses's big sister in the [Exodus story](#). What a great caretaker she was. How smart and quick she was to seize upon the idea of asking Pharaoh's daughter, who found the baby hiding from Pharaoh's harsh decree, if she wanted a Hebrew nurse maid for the baby. How brave that big sister was, to offer the scheme, even knowing the house of Pharaoh was of another religion and ethnic group.

This Iraqi boy reached across all the political, ethnic, and religious barriers of our world to grab my grandmother's heart, and I wondered if his own grandmother was half a world away, torn too by the distance. Where was this child—any child—safe in a world gone mad? This Iraqi baby helped me reach across millennia to connect with those Jewish babies of old who both were protected from insecure madmen.

And here I was in a little [Presbyterian church](#) in Virginia in 2014, wondering about it all. It was a holy night at the clothes closet.

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