

## Away from the Manger

Luke 2:1-14 (15-20) | 12/24/2016

It's a familiar scene that we see everywhere at Christmas -- a loving mother and a protective father, a group of awestruck shepherds, some regal wise men, a few assorted barn animals and, perhaps, a decked out camel all gathered in a stable to gaze with holy countenance upon a manger and the little one who's laid there. Or so one would hope.

You may not have noticed this, but apparently there's been a rash of thefts of baby Jesuses from outdoor nativity scenes around the country. Just Google "Stolen Baby Jesus" and you'll see many stories about disheartened churches having the holy infant stolen right out of the manger, leaving all the characters looking at nothing but straw.

The police say that most of the thefts are pranks, and that baby Jesus thieves aren't usually the sharpest knives in the drawer. Take the case of the five sorority sisters arrested last year in Monmouth, Illinois, who stole the baby Jesus out of the manger scene on the town square and dumped him on the lawn of the Monmouth College president's home. They hatched the plot (you guessed it) in a bar. Or how about the woman in Fredericksburg, Virginia, who stole an 80-pound statue of baby Jesus and then bragged about it on Facebook, even posting a picture? One of her Facebook friends turned her in. Duh.

Of course, there are others who steal baby Jesuses out of anger against Christianity. There are plenty of people who want to remove Jesus from the public eye, and stealing a plastic baby, while not exactly grand theft, is nonetheless symbolic of a desire to get rid of him before he and his followers cause more trouble.

But regardless of whether it's out of stupidity or out of anti-Christian vandalism, little baby Jesuses are disappearing at an alarming rate. What's a church to do?

Enter a company called Brickhouse Security, which is offering to install free GPS trackers in baby Jesuses used in outdoor nativity displays. The idea is that a church could use a computer or smartphone to track baby Jesus' whereabouts when he is "away from the manger" -- ostensibly to get him back. Saint Ambrose Roman Catholic Church in Old Bridge, N.J. installed the device after suffering from thefts and vandalism several years in a row. "There's been no attempt of theft since we announced that we're tracking our Jesus," said Alan Czyewski of Saint Ambrose Church. That's right. We're tracking Jesus. Leave him alone.

Now, nobody likes to have things stolen, and theft is certainly wrong, but the theological question we want to ask is about which is worse: stealing Jesus, or just leaving him alone, secure in the manger?

One of the problems with preaching on Christmas Eve is that everyone knows the story. We come to church on Christmas Eve expecting to see Jesus in the manger, and we're happy about that. Who doesn't love babies? Who doesn't love this scene? Why would anyone want to wreck that by stealing him away?

But the truth of the story is -- and what we often miss -- is that *there were people who wanted to steal the real baby Jesus right after he was born*. The gospels make it clear that the arrival of this baby, while a joy for many, was a threat to many more. Matthew tells us the story of Herod the Great, who was so threatened by the possibility of a rival to his throne that he ordered all the babies in Bethlehem under 2 years old to be taken from their cribs and killed -- a lot of empty mangers and empty homes were left behind.

Call them what you will, but maybe those who want to eliminate Jesus from public view out of anti-Christian rage actually get the story of Christmas better than some of us because they know what Herod knew: *This baby is dangerous*.

This is the real back story of Christmas. The child who is born in the postcard manger scene will grow up and be a threat to the status quo, a threat to those who wield power through force of arms or their wealth. He will expose the inner thoughts of human hearts and call people to a new way of living. He will talk about a God who is intimately involved in public, in politics and with people, rather than a God who is merely private, quiet and spiritual.

Jesus will preach about a kingdom that has nothing to do with power, wealth and military might, but everything to do with servanthood, sacrifice and suffering. Indeed, he will act as though that kingdom was already becoming a reality. He will spend his time eating and associating with people on the margins of society -- the sick, the poor, the outcast, the prostitute, the tax collector -- while rebuking the religious, the elite, the insiders. He will challenge the powers of sin and death by taking them on directly, all the way to the cross. You can't defeat someone who wants nothing from the world, who practices what he preaches, and who is willing to die while forgiving his tormentors. Such a person is dangerous to the status quo and must be removed.

Interestingly, the world seems to get this, but many Christians do not. We want Jesus to stay right where he is. "We are tracking Jesus. Leave him alone." We want a Jesus who stays within our own set of doctrinal boundaries, a Jesus whom we can keep privately and quietly on display at church while we may ignore him the rest of the week. We want a Jesus who matches our expectations, and who blesses our political agendas -- a personal Jesus who orbits around us, our purposes and our needs. We want a baby Jesus we can admire rather than the living and active Jesus who cares less about our religious expectations than he does about the world's redemption.

The truth is that while some people might be stealing Jesus, we who claim him must actually go a step further and let him run loose in our lives. The manger-born baby, God's Word made flesh, came to change the world and us along with it. In Paul's letter to Titus, he writes these words: "But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is sure. I desire that you insist on these things, so that those who have come to believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works; these things are excellent and profitable to everyone." (Titus 3:4-8)

What Paul is saying here is that God's goodness and love is poured out to us in Jesus, and that love will find its way outward in good works toward others. We receive a gift and we pass it on. We don't hold on to Jesus; we share him with the world. There are many like Herod who do not know love but, only power. Like Jesus, we are to love them anyway, even when they try to steal our joy.

So here's the deal: Jesus doesn't need to be protected, guarded, tracked or defended; he just wants to be followed. And if we follow him, he will take us out among those who need the gift of his love the most: people who hatch drunken plots in bars, people who clamor for attention, people who are angry at the world and angry at God, people who are broken and have no happy in their holidays. It's a love that's dangerous because it calls us to risk ourselves in service to the world, but that's where Jesus' love goes -- toward those who have none. The prophet Isaiah was right, "A little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11:6); one who is born not only to be admired in a manger, but to be "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). We don't track Jesus in order to bring him back into our lives. Rather, we track him biblically, prayerfully, joyfully in order to see where he wants to lead us.

In Dittmer, Mo., Pastor Scott Lohse of Saint Martin's United Church of Christ had an idea: "We didn't want to be found nailing Jesus down or tying him to an anchor or putting him on a chain," he says. "We wanted to find a way to put a display on our lawn that symbolized the season, but also symbolizes the fact that Christmas is really about giving."

So, the church has a nativity display, but in the manger there's no statue or doll of baby Jesus. Instead, there are hundreds of ornaments depicting the baby and a sign that says, "Free, take one." "Christ is a gift," says Pastor Scott. "He doesn't belong to us and so you can't steal him from us."

Jesus is a gift to be shared away from the manger, and not just at Christmas.

## PASTOR KEITH