

Luke 2:1-14

“Who Stole Baby Jesus?”

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You may recall that we started this Christmas journey back around the end of November on the First Sunday in Advent.

We began our way to the manger and our encounter with the Nativity’s “usual suspects” – Mary, Joseph, et al.

While we come to the manger in faith, sometimes there are those who come to the nativity with alternative ideas. Almost ten years ago, back in 2012 there were a rash of thefts from nativity scenes around the United States.

The thieves were absconding with just one figure from the nativity scene – in fact the main character – you guessed it – the one of whom Imogene Herdman one of the lead characters in the classic children’s book by Barbara Robinson *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* declared he’d never have gotten out of the kindergarten if he had to write all the names by which we know him...

“His name shall be called...

Wonderful,

Counselor,

Mighty God,

Everlasting Father,

The Prince of Peace...”

The character stolen was none other than...the infant lowly...the one in whom our hopes and fears were met...baby Jesus!

Churches had their baby Jesus’ stolen right out from under their noses (or at least their front lawns).

They came in to find the manger empty & the gathered nativity community staring down and nothing but straw.

Police reported most thefts were pranks and that baby Jesus though lost was usually quickly found.

Monmouth, Illinois – five sorority sisters took him from the town square and placed him on the lawn of the College President’s home... (That would never happen at our prestigious Gettysburg College – The Theological Seminary though...perhaps?)

Fredericksburg, VA – an 80 pound statue of baby Jesus was taken and the braggart who stole him posted photos on of all places Facebook. (A friend dropped the dime and this individual was found out.)

Having probed the funnier side of stealing baby Jesus – we cannot overlook the possibility that there are those who would steal the baby out of angst or anger at Christianity. We cannot overlook the chance that there are some who would want to remove Jesus from the public eye. The thought being that by stealing a plastic baby, while not grand-larceny, nonetheless see it as a symbolic gesture of a desire to get rid of him before he and his followers can cause more trouble.

Whether out of merriment or malice, these thefts of little baby Jesus leave us wondering *what’s a church to do?*

It’s the question that can be answered in two ways – both of which present an opportunity for those involved.

The first choice sees an opportunity for monetary gain. In the midst of the Bethlehem Baby Boy kidnappings security companies could find a market for profit by installing GPS trackers in baby Jesuses used in outdoor nativity displays. For a price, churches could have access to their Savior’s whereabouts via computer or smartphone whenever he is “away from the manger” and can get him back to where he belongs.

The second choice, however, answers a different way...through a lens of faith. When it comes to faith, perhaps the opportunity isn't about monetary profit? Perhaps it's about following where the Christ Child goes. For this Bethlehem Baby Boy will in his adult years tell his disciples, "What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?" (Luke 9:25)

Maybe Jesus' place *is* beyond the walls of a church's perimeter.
Maybe Jesus calls us *beyond* our comfort zones.
Maybe Jesus awakens in us something that *sends* us out rather than hems us in.

Perhaps the opportunity then, is for us to seize the moments we've been given to share the Good News of this Bethlehem Baby Boy who tells disciples, "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid." (Matthew 5:14)

Dittmer, Montana – St. Martin's United Church of Christ recognized their baby Jesus was stolen from their outdoor nativity scene every year. Pastor Scott Lohse saw this not as a detriment to the gospel. Rather, he saw it as an opportunity. They chose to keep the manger occupied in another way. "We didn't want to be found nailing baby Jesus down or tying him to an anchor or putting a chain on him," Lohse said, "We wanted a way to put the display on our lawn that was symbolic of the season and also symbolized that Christmas is really about giving."

So the church continued their nativity display with a slight twist. Instead of a plastic doll or statue of baby Jesus in the manger you will find hundreds of ornaments depicting the baby Jesus and a sign which reads, "Free, take one."

“Christ is a gift,” the church believes, “He doesn’t belong to us and so you can’t steal him from us. [We belong to him and go where he goes.]”

Interestingly, the world seems to get this while we in the church sometimes miss it.

We want Jesus to stay right where he is.

Don’t mess with him...leave him right there.

We want a Jesus who somehow orbits our personal atmospheres meeting our purposes and needs.

We want a Jesus we can admire rather than a Jesus who calls us to care for the world’s needs and redemption.

We want a Jesus we can meet with for an hour once a week and then neatly box and place upon the shelf until the following week.

We want a Jesus who doesn’t ask too much of us.

If we’re honest with ourselves, if I’m honest with myself, then I admit I’ve been there myself – I’ve not wanted Jesus to ask too much of me.

Yet, the truth is that while some may steal Jesus, we who claim him must go a step further and let him run amok in our lives. The Bethlehem Baby Boy, God’s word made flesh, came to change the world and us along with it. This is how the Apostle Paul puts it in his letter to Titus,

“⁴ But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water^[a] of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. ⁶ This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. ⁸ 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)

God’s goodness and love is poured out to us in Jesus, and when that love runs loose in us then it 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 with a white knuckled tight grip.

Rather we share him with the world.

Or, let him share himself with the world through us.

“Christ is a gift,” the church believes, “He doesn’t belong to us and so you can’t steal him from us. [We belong to him and go where he goes.]”

Jesus doesn’t need protected, guarded, tracked or defended...

Jesus just wants to be faithfully followed.

Sometimes that means stepping outside our comfort zones as we serve.

The following story is based on a real life case of a stolen baby Jesus as it aired on the television series *Dragnet*.

A church in Los Angeles (I believe) had their Jesus stolen from the church’s nativity display.

The investigation into the theft found nothing.

Then one morning a little boy came walking down the center aisle of the church toward the Priest pulling behind him a wagon into which lay the church’s Baby Jesus.

When asked about where he had found the baby Jesus the little boy explained that he had prayed for a wagon for Christmas and that if he got the wagon he would take Jesus for a ride in the wagon. And that is just what this little boy was doing – making good on his promise and now he was returning Jesus back to his home. The episode ended, saying, “No charges were filed. Case closed.”

When God said “Yes” to us in Bethlehem’s Baby Boy – God promised through the life, death and resurrection of the Christ to never leave us abandoned.

When we say “Yes” to God via faith commitment in Bethlehem’s Baby Boy – we promise God to take the Christ with us wherever we go.

You don’t need a little wagon to take Jesus with you into this world – all you need is a life that invests in the faith forming disciplines of our Christian faith which will ultimately begin to open our eyes to see where Jesus wants to lead us – to see the opportunities for sharing the Good News with others.

“Christ is a gift,” the church believes, “He doesn’t belong to us and so you can’t steal him from us. [We belong to him and go where he goes.]”

That is our charge...Case still pending.

Alleluia & Amen.