

## Advent

# This Baby Is Dangerous!

Frankton – 12/21/14

Scripture: Luke 2.1-7 Jesus is born in and laid in a manger

Proposition: We need to let the baby Jesus out of the manger.

We see this scene at Christmas. In fact, it's a familiar scene that we see everywhere at Christmas. You see it on church lawns, personal homes, and maybe even on the town square. The scene is this: [SLIDE] a loving mother kneeling beside a cradle and a slightly bewildered father nearby, but not as close as the mother. There a group of awestruck shepherds in their shabby robes holding onto their shepherd's crooks. There are some wise men dressed a whole lot nicer than the shepherds and they are kneeling with gifts in their hands, extending them toward the cradle. There's always a few assorted barn animals and, of course, one or two decked out camels. They are all gathered in a stable or just outside it, and they are gazing with awe and reverence upon a manger and the little child who's laid there.

At least one would hope the baby is in the cradle. You may not know this, but apparently over the last few years, the number of baby Jesus's stolen from cradles has been on the increase. It appears to be a country-wide phenomenon. I just heard about a case like this on the Indianapolis the other day. The police say that most of the thefts are pranks, mostly done by teenagers, and that baby Jesus thieves aren't usually the sharpest knives in the drawer. Take the case of the woman in Fredericksburg, Virginia, who gained liquid courage by stopping at a bar then stole a 20-pound baby Jesus and then bragged about it on Facebook – even posting a picture of the Jesus she stole. One of her Facebook friends turned her in. Duh.

Of course, people have other reasons to steal baby Jesus. One reason might be anger against Christianity. They've been mistreated by people in the church who spoke of love but only showed judgment. They feel they've been gypped by the genie-in-a-bottle-god who didn't grant them three wishes. Yes, I know that's not who God is, God is not a genie in a bottle; but they don't know that. There are other people who can't understand a God of love when they don't feel too loved. There are plenty of people who want to remove Jesus from the public eye. So 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 them more trouble.

But regardless of whether it's out of stupidity or out of anti-Christian vandalism, little baby Jesus's are disappearing at an alarming rate. So, what's a church to do? Enter a company 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." The baby-Jesus-tracking GPS units can be hidden inside the baby Jesus, where no thief would think to look. No sooner does the baby go missing than church authorities can flip open a cell phone or power up a laptop and track him down -- to within 10 feet or so of his location. Imagine the shock and horror of some poor mother, who answers her doorbell only to find the local minister standing on the doorstep, along with Officer Joe Friday. "Just the facts, ma'am. Do you have a teenage son? We need to search his underwear drawer. We have reason to believe baby Jesus is hiding there." How humiliating!

## Advent

A Roman Catholic Church southwest of New York City installed the device after suffering at the hands of baby Jesus thieves for several years in a row. They made no bones about what they did. There's a sign near the stable that says something to the effect that baby Jesus has a tracking device on him so stealing him will only get you caught. The priest at the church says that no one has stolen the baby Jesus since they installed the GPS system a few years ago. So, effectively, they have electronically tied Jesus to the manger. So if you're thinking about taking him, you better just leave him alone, because this baby is dangerous. He'll just get you in trouble. Now, nobody likes to have things stolen, and theft is certainly wrong. But this situation brings up a theological question: [SLIDE] Which is worse, stealing baby Jesus or tying him to the manger?

One of the problems with preaching on this scripture is that almost everyone knows the story – Joseph and a very pregnant Mary traveling to Bethlehem where they find no room at the inn. The baby ends up being born in a barn with all the cattle “lowing,” whatever that means. (And by the way: you don't see many cattle in manger scenes.) Shepherds on a hillside get an angelic visit then go visit the newborn baby. And don't forget the Wise Men and their gifts and camels, even though, in actuality, they probably weren't there that night. We know the scene well, or at least we think we do. We come to church this time of year 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 hard truth of the story - 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 a few and an unknown joy for many, was a threat to many, 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 – leaving a lot of empty mangers and a lot of empty pack-n-plays and a lot of empty hearts. And while Luke's story, which we just read, is not as violent, Luke implies that the baby Jesus is still vulnerable. The story starts with Caesar Augustus, the self-proclaimed divine ruler of the Roman Empire, ordering a census so that the people could be taxed. Caesar didn't know that Jesus, the Messiah, God's anointed king, had been born in Bethlehem, but had he known a king had been born in Bethlehem, he certainly would have made sure the Bethlehem baby didn't live to see adulthood.

Call them what you will, but maybe those who want to eliminate Jesus from public view out of anti-Christian angst may actually understand the story of Christmas better than most of us because they know what Herod knew and what Caesar would have known: [SLIDE] This baby is dangerous. This is the real back story of Christmas. Why is the baby dangerous? 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 the force of their bank accounts. He will expose the inner thoughts of human hearts and call people to a way of living that involves caring for others, especially those society looks on as the “less thans.” He will talk about a God who is intimately involved with people, rather than a God who is private, quiet and behind the big curtain.

Jesus will preach about a kingdom that has nothing to do with power, wealth and military might, but it has 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

## Advent

people on the margins of society – the least, the last, the lost, the lonely, and the left-out - while rebuking the religious, the elite, and the insiders. He will challenge the powers of sin and death by taking them on directly, all the way to the cross. The world 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 understand this, but many Christians do not. We want Jesus to stay right where he is. "We've tied Jesus to the manger so you might as well 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 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 revolves around us, our purposes and our needs.
- We want a baby Jesus we can cuddle with 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 to know him have been holding him hostage in the manger. Instead of keeping him in the manger, we who claim Jesus must actually 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 one of the little-used readings the lectionary offers for Christmas, Paul's letter to Titus, Paul writes these words: [SLIDE] *When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, he saved us...because of his mercy.* [SLIDE] *I want you to insist on these teachings so that all who trust in God will devote themselves to doing good.* [Ti 3.4,8] It doesn't say he saved us because of the good things we do, but rather because of his mercy. And because we know we are saved, we will do good things.

What the author is saying here is that 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 we do toward others. When we receive this gift and we pass it on. We don't tie him in the manger. We don't hold on to Jesus; we share him with the world. There are many people like the Herods and Caesars of the world who do not know love, they only know power. And just like Jesus did, we are to love them anyway, even when they try to steal our joy or our manger's baby Jesus.

So here's the deal: Jesus doesn't want to be protected, or guarded, or 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: like people who hatch drunken plots in bars, like the people who clamor for attention, like the people who are angry at the world and angry at God, like the 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, [SLIDE] *A little child shall lead them...*" [IS 11.6.] We don't tie Jesus to the manger so no one else can have him. We let him loose on the world and lead us so we can follow him.

# Advent