

## **“The Mysteriously Missing Messiah”**

**Text: Luke 2: 1 - 20**

**Used: Cong. Church of Naugatuck – 12/24/02 – 5:30 p.m.**

**Prayer:** May the words of my mouth and the mediations of our hearts, be acceptable unto Thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I enjoy a good cop show on TV or a mystery book now and then. But never in my life did I think I would become intertwined in a real-life mystery just five days before Christmas. This, my friends, is a case of grinchy thievery and media scrutiny, of public outrage ...and of course, like any good story...of an ultimate hero. Tonight I will reveal the true story. I call this The Case of the Mysteriously Missing Messiah.

It all started last Wednesday afternoon. The church where my wife, Paige, serves as the pastor sits on one of the main roads in Milford. Each Advent the church puts up a life size crèche scene on the front lawn. All the characters are cut from wood and were hand painted by church members. It really is a stunning site. This year the Connecticut Post decided they wanted to run a picture of this crèche as front cover for their Christmas day edition. So one of their reporters called up last Wednesday and inquired if he and a photographer could come out the next day to take the picture. Paige said that would be fine, but the baby is not normally out in the manger yet. Why might that be you'd ask? Many churches do not place the baby in the manger until the night the baby Jesus was born. Anyhow, the reporter asked if Paige would mind putting the baby out since the picture would be running on Christmas Day. She said that would be fine and did it immediately.

The next day the reporter and the photographer showed up...but there was no baby to be found in the manger. They got a hold of Paige and asked her why the baby wasn't there. She told them she put it out the day before. The poor reporter now felt plagued by guilt. But Paige told him not to worry; the baby was the one thing in the manger that was not handmade. It was just a standard doll and she was sure that she could dig up another from the nursery for the picture. After the photograph was taken, Paige returned the substitute doll to the nursery and forgot about the whole incident.

But the reporter didn't. And neither did the reporter believe that the doll might have been taken by some well meaning church member who figured the doll didn't belong in the manger yet. Not only did he write a big article for the Post about the "baby Jesus stolen from the manger", but he also put the story out on the news wires.

Friday morning, I returned from some grocery shopping to find nine messages on our answering machine...at least two a piece from channel 12, channel 3, and channel 30 news. Paige was out Christmas shopping and no one could track her down...including me. All these news reporters wanted interviews about the stolen baby. I had one reporter that I talked to who was so frantic to find Paige that he said he'd meet her at whatever store she was at. Finally, I remembered that Paige had a haircut appoint. So I called the salon and told them to have her call me as soon as she came in. When I finally passed on the messages to Paige, she went to go do several television interviews, with her

stylist chasing her out the door saying, “just let me cut your hair before your on television.”

That evening all three networks ran stories. Channel 30 actually lead with the story - which I couldn't quite believe. With our country on the precipice of war, a story about a missing doll is headline news? But I also must give them credit – they did have the best lead for the story – *Missing Messiah in Milford*.

Later that evening, with Paige again out trying to finish her Christmas shopping, I received a call from her grandmother who lives out in Waterford. “Hello Terry” I said, having glanced over at the caller ID. “Oh, my. I can't believe it. It is horrible” she exclaimed. Quickly jumping into a deal-with-crisis mode, I grabbed my car keys and clipped the cell phone to my belt while saying, “It's o.k. Calm down tell me what happened. We'll work it out.” “I just saw Paige on the news”, she responded, “who could have done this to the poor baby?”

I started wondering that night: why is everybody so upset about a lost doll? How had this doll become sort of public talisman without which Christmas will have lost all its power? I mean reporters were asking if the missing baby Jesus pointed to some epidemic of cruelty in our society. I just kept thinking – it's a missing doll. The irony is that it wasn't even the churches only doll. The previous year some good Samaritan left a doll during Advent somehow discomfoted by the emptiness of the manger. And so I wonder: Why did this doll taken from a manger seem to touch people at such as deep level? Do we worry that there will be no baby Jesus to fill our own mangers this year? Do we

worry that the baby Jesus may not be found in the empty places in our lives where we need him to be born this night?

Even later that evening, the original reporter from the Post called back. He wanted to know if the baby Jesus had been found. Since Paige was still out and about, I took his name and phone number. By the time Paige returned, the night reporter was then on duty. He explained that the paper wanted to know if the baby Jesus had been returned because they wanted to keep the pressure up if not. Paige calmly said to the reporter, "I think we have done enough. We, in the church, don't believe in a God of guilt. We believe in a God of grace...and that's the message we want everyone to hear this Christmas."

Ah, enter the ultimate hero. Oh, you thought the hero was going to be me...well, while I am obviously significant to the story...the ultimate hero for any true Christmas tale is always God. But God is not always as we desire God to be. Even when we want God to arrive with a vengeance and punish all those evil doers, God is born among us in a moment of simple, vulnerable grace.

And God will not always be where we want God to be. God will not always stay put where we want God remain. God goes to the empty places. God looks for the empty manger. And that is where God will be born. Born in the places where grace is needed the most.

There is an important epilogue to this story. The original Post reporter called back again at about 10 o'clock Friday night. He just had to know if the baby Jesus had been returned. Paige, told him that there was no new news. Before, he hung up, he asked Paige one final question, "I heard you talking about

this Longest Night Service at your church for people who are grieving. Do you think it would be alright for my wife and myself to come? I lost both of my parents this past year and think it just might be the right place for me to be.”

Having heard this conversation, I was reminded of an Ann Weems’ poem:

Each year the Child is born again.  
Each year some new heart  
    finally hears,  
        finally sees,  
            finally knows love.  
And in heaven there is great rejoicing!  
There is a festival of stars!  
There is a celebration among the angels!  
For in the finding of one lost sheep,  
    the heart of the shepherd is glad, and  
    Christmas happens once more...

It became real clear to me in that moment that the Baby Jesus was never really missing. The doll – well that still hasn’t been returned. But the Baby Jesus could be found right where he belonged. He was off finding find the places where his birth was needed the most...and being born in those places. And that, my friends, is what the Christmas story has always been about. Amen.