

The Bethel Pulpit

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December 24 , 2017 – Christmas Eve (7pm & 9pm)



BETHEL

LUTHERAN CHURCH

On the web at www.bethel-madison.org

312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

Text: Luke 2:1-14 [15-20]



The farmhouse where my four siblings and I grew up is still there, in daily use, and again this year, last night to be specific, **hosted another bustling family** Christmas ...lutefisk, lefse, rumagrut, rosettes, crumcake, etc. Were they still alive, my parents would have been delighted to host their 14 great grandchildren... especially trying to “**hold still**” for a photo. It was only as the **hovering adult crowd broke into song** that the kids were sufficiently amazed by the ad hoc choir to reach the point of being flashed by the camera.

The manger scene was again displayed as it has been for some 65+ years. Made out of a heavy cardboard, it is small, housing the hole behind for the stable light. The various pieces **bearing the wear and tear of the years** depict the presence of those whom St. Luke tells us had arrived at the stable **to join the cattle** whose living room **they were sharing** for the night. Mary and Joseph, some donkeys and camels and sheep, a few shepherds, an **angel perched on the roof** announcing the Good News, and some Wise Men bearing gifts. And of course, **the baby Jesus**. Off to the side is a lighted plastic church, ivory colored, the steeple cross long gone, but the colored windows still emanating their beauty. It's first home had been in the Christmas section of **Strand's Our Own Hardware** where my uncle Trygve worked. I'm sure it sold for full price.

In **our own home** alongside Island Lake, as well as when we lived in Elk River and before that south Minneapolis, there is a **wood stable**, rough exterior, a 6/12 pitch roof, a fence around the porch, a light holder on the back, and a ladder to the roof....**maybe to let the angel get down**. The cast of characters are from the **Fontanini collection**...made in Italy. Each year **the cast grows a bit** except when a passing pet decides it is in need of a toy, or a differently-shaped bone. That is a **rare occurrence**, however. Our manger scene includes a

myrtle wood mother and baby camel ...nursing...that I carried home personally some 40 years ago from the Baptist Book Store in downtown Bethlehem. There are also some accompanying myrtle wood shepherds...one lovingly carrying a lamb.

No doubt you have **your own manger scene memories** as well as your own more modern display. The world over, both **children and adults arrange and rearrange** the figures in the stable scene. On occasion, parents of small children visit the manger scene and **find Mary in the strangest of places**....but there wasn't an **ounce of disrespect** intended by the move. It was just a case of children trying to **take hold of this amazing, familiar story** and **make it their own**.

We **still do it**, of course. In **manger scenes the world over** we depict this familiar scene and **if we think to do so**, we pause each season **to make it our own once more**. A pastor friend tells of a trip to downtown Chicago a few years ago. “I stopped for a moment before the **Nativity Scene on Daley Plaza**,” she writes. That one is nearly life-size and, as expected, it offers all the usual players. Only **if** you look closely, **you will see that baby Jesus is chained** to the ground: **ensuring that no prankster will carry him off**.

It happens every year, so it seems. If you google the words “**stolen baby Jesus**”, you will find dozens of news stories of the infant being taken from manger scenes all across the country. Year after year, in town upon town, **from church corners to front yards, someone will think it sport to take baby Jesus away, out of the manger, often never to be seen again**.

There's the story about the **city in Florida that attached a GPS tracking device** to their baby Jesus and so they were able to locate the culprit quickly.

Another story was that of the **stolen baby Jesus showing up 8 months later on the owner's front porch with photos of his adventures attached**: from sitting on a bicycle to hanging out in someone's kitchen.

There was a **story of a prank a couple years ago**, picked up by USA Today: In Wisconsin **three different manger scenes from three different churches** were robbed of their baby Jesus. It seems there is **speculation** that the thief is protesting the presence of Jesus in the manger before Christmas actually comes. So given all of this, and **who knows what else happened in previous years, the city of Chicago simply chains him to the ground.**

Without defending anyone who takes Jesus out of the manger, even **for what they believe to be the best of reasons**, we who again hear The Christmas Gospel this very night **hear it KNOWING** that the real **Jesus can't be kept in the manger** by means of chains. **And the real Jesus?** We don't need to saddle him with a GPS unit to be able **to track him down**. You and I encounter Jesus **ALL THE TIME** in all **sorts of places**, and yes, **not infrequently in the unexpected places.**

It is **so very true:** we **discover the real Jesus whenever and wherever** we are moved by the truth that **Jesus was born humble and poor...**, and that God still has the most **tender of places in his heart** for those for whom Christmas dinner **will be hard to come by this year** --- and for **those for whom a decent meal** any day of the week might be **only a dream.**

WE SEE Jesus in all kinds of places: whenever we recall that **God loves deeply** all those who, like Mary & Joseph, are in **danger of having no warm, safe place to sleep tonight.**

We see Jesus whenever we see that God can be seen embracing those who grieve alongside all the parents of **the children who die...**, the **brothers and sisters who lose siblings**, the **husbands who bury their wives** and the **wives who bury their husbands**, the adult sons and daughters who bury **their aged parents** at life's end.

We see Jesus when we see God embracing those who are **recovering from addictions**; those desperately **seeking meaningful work**; those thrust onto the **path of surgery, and chemotherapy, and institutionalization**, and **wounded relationships**, and **all forms of healing** in response to the **uninvited advent of disease**, unemployment, **broken marriages, or loss of hope.** We see Jesus when God is **seen to walk in the midst of those who struggle and suffer...** day after day.

NO.... no GPS is needed! Jesus is as near as the next act of generosity to someone for whom **a moment of kindness** will make **ALL THE DIFFERENCE** ... sometimes for the rest of their life. St. Paul said it best: **The love which came down at Christmas is patient and kind, not irritable or resentful, not envious nor boastful..., it does not insist in its own way.** SO... remember tonight that **THE STORY is YOURS** again this year!

Take a moment to:

- a) **kneel** with a child before the manger scene
- b) **wonder** about the holy story once again
- c) **know** that the story of that which happened far away has **come to you once more.** It is Good News for all the world.

AND REMEMBER: We **can't chain Jesus to the ground.** We **can't keep him in the manger.** In wondrous ways – **Jesus will keep breaking free...**making His Way into the world, **into your life.., into your heart. Don't you wonder where you'll see him next?** Let's go from this night **keeping our eyes open** and our **hearts readied...**because **Jesus is going to show up before you know it.** And if anyone is thinking about stealing Jesus....Well..., **No need....Jesus is already yours....** And the truth is...**that we don't have to wait until Christmas Day to have him as yours. AMEN.**