

## CHRISTMAS: LOST AND FOUND

Every Christmas Eve, for this 7:30 p.m. worship service, I like to tell a Christmas story that I find meaningful in the hope that it will speak to you and be meaningful to you as well.

A couple of weeks ago, I brought home from work a briefcase bulging with books containing Christmas stories and ideas. I flipped through my various resources but nothing really grabbed or inspired me. I was at a loss for that special Christmas story I could pass on to you tonight. However, last week, I was reading through the current issue of *The Presbyterian Outlook* (December 8/15, 2008, page 23), and there on the very last page I found what I had been looking for - the appropriate Christmas story. It's entitled *Losing Jesus and the* and the author is Agnes W. Norfleet, who is the pastor of Shandon Presbyterian Church in Columbia, SC. I invite you to use the gift of your imagination and enter into her story with me.

She writes: When my family moved from Atlanta to Columbia three years ago, we could identify only one thing lost in the move. Baby Jesus. He was the centerpiece, obviously, of a hand-carved, olive wood crèche. Given to us by a friend after a trip to Israel and Palestine, the pieces came carefully wrapped in an Arabic newspaper. Although my husband and I each brought our own manger scenes into our marriage, this exquisitely beautiful one from the Holy Land quickly assumed the prominent place on the living room mantel.

The frustrating thing about losing Jesus was I had been so intentional about preparing our Christmas decorations for the move. The fifteen-year-old Florida fruit boxes were replaced with a giant plastic storage container, and I consolidated ornaments carefully in layers of bubble wrap, discarding ones that were never used. The weary old broken ones, with which we could not part for sentimental reasons, were carefully laid out in the bottom of the container even though they would never adorn the Christmas tree again.

Having packed these Christmas things with such intention, the Advent after we moved to Columbia I was astounded to discover baby Jesus missing. We still had the manger in which he lay, but the baby's body was gone!

The first year we put up the crèche simply leaving the manger empty. The second year I began to inquire of Ten Thousand Villages stores to see if we might find a similar one that would fit. Larry asked one of our boys if he would carve a new Jesus if he were able to find some olive wood, but we never got around to making a replacement happen. So last December when we were readying to host the choir Christmas party and fill the house with church members I asked Larry, "What will you say if someone notices that Jesus is missing on the mantel?" and as if he'd already thought about it, he shot back in a second, "I'll say, 'he doesn't arrive until Christmas Eve - don't you know?!'"

The significance of losing baby Jesus grew in my imagination. I began to ponder how that is what so often happens. We get wrapped up in the trappings of the holidays, the partying, the gift giving, the relentless frenzy of December, and the next thing you know Jesus is no where to be found. You know the Jesus I mean - the one who calls us, challenges us, burns the chaff out of us, forgives us, saves us, and redeems us from whatever needs redeeming. That Jesus.

We can lose sight of him somehow at Christmas-time, and perhaps no one is guiltier than pastors like me who help orchestrate these church-wide nostalgic recollections of bleak mid-winters long ago with an occasional nod toward the real meaning of Christmas. Once we get past the First Sunday of Advent's apocalyptic vision, and the Second Sunday's encounter with

John the Baptist, we're pretty much ready for the Jesus "so tender and mild" ourselves so that we too collapse in the cultural swirl of eggnog-induced amnesia.

Jesus missing from our family's manger scene for a couple of years began to feel like he was righting a wrong somehow, or at least keeping me quietly aware of my own seasonal acquiescence to things much smaller than the gospel heralded by angels and given birth through both womb and tomb.

But then I found him. I found our small, hand carved olive wood baby Jesus, and finding him where I did was worth every anxiety-ridden moment of wondering where he was.

At New Year's when I was putting away the stuff for another year, there he was. Not in the manger scene section of the box where he was supposed to be, but in a little sleeve of bubble wrap at the bottom of the tree ornament section, tucked away among the old ornaments too fragile to decorate the tree.

He was at the bottom, with a little pill-bottle bird feeder with a felt roof and ledge that one of Larry's childhood church school teachers had made; with a torn paper snowflake my grown nephew Tommy made so long ago when he could barely use scissors and misspelled his own name; with a broken star Mrs. Rissi helped me weave together when I was about eight with straw imported all the way from her native Switzerland.

That's where baby Jesus had been all that time, at the bottom of the box, with the fragile and the broken ones that didn't make the cut. And finding him there I realized he was never lost at all.

This true story reminds us of the real reason we celebrate Christmas. The good news of the Gospel is that, in Jesus Christ, we, who were once lost have been found. God took on human flesh in Jesus Christ and came down to earth looking for us all for we had gotten quite lost in our selfish pursuits and in the various ways we either hurt or ignore each other. We were broken by our sinfulness and we couldn't repair ourselves.

Jesus didn't stop seeking until he found us, died for us, rose again for us, and saved us. By the grace of God, in Jesus Christ, we are made whole, and we have found our way back to God. We are finally back where we belong - at home with God in this life and the next. Reaffirming these facts of our faith ensure that we will indeed have a very merry Christmas. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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