

We Don't Need a Plastic Baby Jesus

It's wonderful to see so many of you braving the cold to worship together on this Holy night. We are going to sing, hear the ancient story of a humble birth, and light quite a few candles ... but if you came here tonight expecting to find a baby lying in a manger, I've got some unfortunate news for you.

We're missing baby Jesus!

That really is the truth... at least in part. We have several scenes of the nativity around this church. There's the big one outside, a small one on the altar, a colorful one in this first stain-glass window, and finally the very detailed one Monika set up in the back of the church. That one is especially 'cool'.

There's camels and palm trees, sheep with their shepherds watching over them from the rocks above, a star over the stable where Mary and Joseph are... but when we unpacked the set this year we discovered there is **no baby Jesus!** He was here last year but he must have gotten misplaced when it was boxed up.



It reminds me of an old Christmas story I read once called "If You're Missing Baby Jesus, call 7162". It's a story told by Jean Gietzen who recalls a winter in 1943 while living in North Dakota. Her mother had purchased a new nativity set at the local "Family Variety" store and when they arrived home they discovered TWO figurines of the baby Jesus. "Great", said the kids. "Now we have twins!"

But the mother thought some other nativity set at the store could be missing this most important of pieces so she sent the children back to the store and told them to put a sign up by the other sets that read,

"If you're missing baby Jesus, call 7162"

(that was back in the day when 4 numbers were all you needed to make a local call)

For several weeks they waited, but no one called until ...Christmas Eve. Now I know what you're thinking-- this is going to be one of the "warm fuzzy" Hallmark

moments that doesn't really have much to do with real life. Sort of like fake greenery or a plastic Jesus. It looks the part - but it's a far cry from the real thing.

But events take a turn - and the **nativity takes on flesh and blood** once again.

The call was from a young mother, who was trying to make ends meet after her husband had left her and the children. In 1943 that was an even tougher job than today. She was managing by finding odd jobs, including cleaning that local "Family Variety" store where everyday she saw the sign, "If you're missing baby Jesus call 7162"

She was getting by, even scrimping together enough cash for a couple small gifts for the children but on Christmas Eve, **her furnace quit** and it was bitterly cold. She didn't know what to do - but then she remembered the sign in the store. She took a chance and called... thinking anyone who cared so much about a piece in a nativity set would also care a little about her. "I not missin' baby Jesus," she said into the phone. "I love the Lord - but I am missin' some heat".

The rest of this story plays out like most of us would imagine. The whole family mobilizes to meet the needs of the young mother and her children. The father, (*who happens to work for in the heating business*) fixes the furnace and makes a few calls to have extra fuel delivered. Clothes and toys and cookies are shared and TWO families experience the miracle of Love in action.

What started out as a search for a plastic Jesus ended up as an encounter with the real one. It turns out we don't really need the plastic baby Jesus in the manger set at all. What's important...what's vital to ongoing creation of LIFE... is the Word of God that takes on flesh and blood to give hope and healing and courage to a dark and grieving world.

This year, we need the real Jesus more than ever. Too often we have been satisfied with the plastic one... the Jesus we can mold and shape into whatever makes us **feel** the best, **look** the best, or **appear to be** the best. (i.e. the prayer in "Talladega Nights")

Too often we have gotten the idea that God is a judge sitting at a bench, demanding the right moral behavior before any leniency is granted or any mercy shown. You hear about that god when people blame tragedy on somebody's lack of religion. Or when people get all worked up because of the location of nativity sets or whether you should say "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holidays". **The only god who cares about such things is a plastic one, who has no real power to give life.**

Because the real reason for the season is the Word of God taking on flesh and **living**. It is about God loving the world so much that God dives headfirst into the dark despair of mortality and sin ... the same stuff we swim in everyday.

And into that darkness, God shines a light.

It is a light of unconditional love.

- a light of unshakable hope.
- a light that nothing can overcome, not even the pit of hell.

A plastic Jesus melts in the flame of a candle. The real Jesus uses light to chase away our fears and give us the courage to live as he did: with faith that no matter what happens, God can birth new life even out of death.

Tonight many families gather to celebrate the grace-full reality that Love has been born. Some of those gatherings will be filled with laughter and warm memories. Others will have their share of family difficulties and scarred relationships. And a few will be painfully reminded that grief and despair are ever-present realities in the world. Theirs will be a Christmas that seems to be missin baby Jesus.

But hope grows even when it seems too dark. The body of Christ remains a flesh and blood reality. The Spirit of the Living God empowers the body of the church, our bodies, to share the light of Love when others find a candle too difficult to hold.

In Newtown Connecticut there will be many candle light vigils for those who are grieving but in our own town, we also have many people who are depending on those of us with candles to bear the light of God's presence into their darkness. One is a mother who, as of Saturday night, has now lost three of her four children to tragedy and disease.

Right after this worship is over, what do you say that those of who who have 15 minutes to spare and who are able to hold a candle in the cold, take the ones we have lighted tonight and sing Silent Night outside their home. I've already spoken to them and they will be home. That's the kind of light the real baby Jesus came to give.

It is the light of hope, the light of Love come down...
and dwelling among us as the Word with some flesh.

Amen.