

# JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

## The Other Side of Christmas

Micah 5:2-5a

Sunday, December 19, 2021

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One of the most beautiful things about Christmas is the baby imagery of Jesus. Depictions of Mary and Joseph looking adoringly at baby Jesus in the manger will soften the hardest of hearts.

When I served at Pasadena Community Church one of the most beloved and sacred traditions on Christmas Eve was when Mary and Joseph carried baby Jesus into the sanctuary. It was the climax of the Christmas Eve service. Everyone would be holding a candle, singing "Silent Night." Then a bright spotlight would hit Mary and Joseph in a stable with Mary gently holding baby Jesus as we held our candles high. It was always a precious and sacred moment.

There was a rumor that went around the church that we had try outs each year for the cutest baby in the church to play the baby Jesus. That wasn't true, of course. But every year it was difficult to choose which new baby within our congregation would play Jesus. All babies are cute and cuddly and some years we almost had to flip a coin. I mean, imagine Nathan and Erin having to choose which twin to play the baby Savior!

We love baby Jesus. Just like Ricky Bobby in Talladega Nights, we love the baby Jesus – all wrapped up warm, cozy, cute, cuddly with a halo around his little head.

We have a toy Nativity set at home and my son Paul insists on holding on to the little baby Jesus figurine until all the characters are in place. And then he ceremoniously places the baby Jesus in the manger and says, "OK! Finished!"

We love the little baby Jesus.

In fact, people love baby Jesus so much that baby Jesus figures are stolen in dozens of communities across America every year. Sometimes folks even steal entire Nativity sets.

Some years ago, there was a United Methodist church in Pennsylvania that had its baby Jesus stolen and replaced with a pumpkin! And one year in Arkansas a thief not only stole the baby Jesus statue from a public

display, but also the concrete block and chain that was supposed to act as a deterrent! Even criminals love the baby Jesus. And that's good. Because they certainly need Jesus!

We love baby Jesus. Of course, we do! Babies are so darn cute and precious. I love holding them. Many of us love holding them. When I'm performing an infant baptism it almost makes me want another one... almost.

A colleague of mine has a friend named Helen who had a baby boy in her late 30's. The doctors told she and her husband that they couldn't conceive, but they never gave up hope. So, eight long years year, like Abraham and Sarah of old, along came the child they had waited and prayed for.

Helen told my colleague that she remembers the time she was holding her precious baby in the hospital when her pastor walked in. She said, "I don't want to sound sacrilegious, but I don't think that even Mary the mother of Jesus could have been happier or prouder of her child than I am with mine" (Michael Brown, "Baby Jesus is the Easy Part," Day1.org).

Absolutely! Most new mothers feel that way? So do new fathers. I remember when Paul was born I felt like the proudest dad in the world! I told everyone about my son. I still do! Many of you know how often he makes an appearance in my sermons. I am so proud of my boy.

Of course, I remember telling a golf buddy of mine a cute story about Paul one day as we were playing. As he lined up his putt, he said, "Yeah, well come back to me when he is a teenager! Then tell me how cute he is!"

I know. We will find out. That why, right now Brandy and I keep saying, like all parents do, that Paul is growing too fast. Can't he just stay 4 for a bit longer? He is so precious. He says the cutest things. And right now...he likes us. He thinks we are wonderful... And we know when he hits puberty we might not be his favorite people anymore.

My colleague remembers going back to Helen when her precious miracle baby boy had become a teenager and asking her, "So now that your little baby is a teenager are you still convinced that even Mary the mother of Jesus could not have been happier or prouder of her child than you were with yours?" She answered quickly: "Oh, no. Unlike Mary the mother of Jesus, now that my son has become a teenager, every time he leaves the house I give serious thought to changing the locks on the doors!" (Brown).

Yeah, babies are easier. They are cute and cuddly. They don't talk back or get embarrassed when you are around. They smile at you instead of rolling their eyes. They don't ask for your car keys or for an allowance. You are their world.

But the challenge is that babies grow up! They don't stay babies.

And guess what? Neither does baby Jesus. Like all babies, Jesus grows up. Our scripture lesson for today says so: **"And from you, O Bethlehem, small among the clans of Judah, will come for me one who shall rule his people Israel" (Micah 5:2).**

Jesus doesn't remain a quiet, cuddly baby in a manger. He grows up to be a ruler, a king.

In one of my previous churches, I remember having the same conversation every Christmas Eve with an usher. Every Christmas Eve he would say, "Pastor, wouldn't it be nice if could we have these kinds of crowds every week! In regular worship? (he called Sunday worship, regular worship)."

And every year I would say the same the same thing to him, "Yeah, it certainly would."

One Christmas Eve he said it again. And on this Christmas Eve I was not in the best mood. We had 31 services that year. Some folks didn't show up to volunteer... All of these people were filing out of the sanctuary... "Oh, pastor, wouldn't it be nice if we could have these big crowds every week?"

And in a not so pastoral tone I said, "Yeah, it would be nice to have these crowds every week! And if Jesus had stayed a baby we would! Most people don't want baby Jesus to grow up. That's why they don't come back."

Later, I apologized to him for being a bit short with him. And he said, "No, no, you're right. You make a good point."

We all know the baby Jesus in the manger is the easy part. That's why we love Christmas, as we should. Our Savior has been born. And I love Christmas Eve worship. It is by far my favorite worship service of the year. I can't wait for Friday. And I know I am not alone. Christmas Eve worship is the highest attended service of just about every church in the world. Everyone loves it! That's why just about everyone is here! In fact, some conferences tell you not to count it in your average worship attendance figures because it is such an anomaly.

And we get so excited about all of these new people filling our pews, here to celebrate the baby Jesus and hold a candle and sing Silent Night. And, over the years, I have tried every trick in the book to get some of those folks back – provocative sermon series in January on sex, politics, or whether Big Foot exists.

One church gave away a Lexus in January. Another church I heard about was going to bring in a celebrity speaker. I remember one church advertise a preaching juggler who was going to come in the new year. He had the entire Bible memorized. You could call out scripture verses and he would recite them word for word as he juggled. Pretty impressive!

And, sometimes, those things do bring some folks back. Sometimes they do work, but not as much as we wish they would.

Because we all know when another "regular" Sunday worship comes along it's a letdown. You look out into sanctuary and see all the wax that has hardened on the pews from all those candles. And you see that most of those people who filled all of those pews on Christmas Eve are gone.

Why? We have a great church. Our worship services are powerful. The music is fantastic. And every once in a while, a decent sermon is preached! Why?

You know why? Our scripture tells us: **"And from you, O Bethlehem, small among the clans of Judah, will come for me one who shall rule his people Israel."**

Jesus grows from a baby in manger into a ruler, a king. But not just any ruler or king – a King who wants to rule our hearts and lives – a King who makes demands of us – a King who, quite frankly, wants us to do things that we really don't want to do.

I mean, you can't blame folks for not coming back – for only showing up for Christmas Eve. Michael Brown reminds, "Have you ever really read the stuff the grown-up King Jesus asks us to do?"

- **"You shall forgive not seven times, but seventy times seven."** That's a good one Jesus. Wait...that's a joke, right?
- **"Love your enemies, and pray for those who spitefully use you."** My enemies? Really Jesus? You mean ALL of them? What about my mean boss or my unfaithful spouse? Or what about terrorists.... surely, there are some caveats, right?
- **"Give to the poor."** Hey! I have bills to pay. And I want to save as much as I can for retirement. And I want to take that trip to play Saint Andrews and take my family to Aruba. There are non-profits and charities that can take care of those people.
- **"Render unto God what is God's."** Well, didn't God create everything. So, you're saying I have to give God everything – my time, my money, my skills...um, no thank you.
- **"You shall become fishers of people."** Oh please. You have no idea what people do when I talk about Jesus in the office or at school. They look at me like I have 4 heads. I don't want to be one of those people who think I'm a religious fanatic.
- **"Take up your Cross and follow Me."** Michael Brown says, "Uh, crosses are heavy, aren't they? And painful? And lead to all sorts of unpleasant things like, oh I don't know, giving one's life for that which is honorable and true? You think maybe we could delete the 'Cross' part?"
- **"Turn the other cheek."** That is no formula for success. To survive in this world, you have to be a fighter. You must learn to fight back. Besides, people will walk all over you, won't they? I don't want my kids to learn that stuff. I want them to be successful.

**"This is My commandment, that you love one another."** Well, if people were more lovable I could do that one. But the problem is that most people are difficult. If only everyone were as wonderful as me and saw things my way, and voted like me, and had the same views about Covid and vaccines that I do, then loving them would be a lot easier.

Yeah, the grown-up Jesus really said those things. You can look it up. We wish he hadn't, but he did.

A friend of mine recalls trying to shake things up a bit in during his sermon just to see if everyone was paying attention. He was preaching on the parable of the prodigal son. And he decided to act like he was reading it from the Bible but change the ending. So, he opened up the Bible and began to read the parable as it appears in Luke 15. But when he got to the ending he said, "And then the Father threw a big party for the elder son to reward him for staying home and doing the right thing. And when the younger son returned from his escapades the Father made him sleep in the barn and gave him only bread and water forever and ever."

There was some silence and then an elderly lady in the back called out, "That's the way it should've been preacher!"

Yeah, there are lot of things Jesus said that we wish he had not said. There are lot of things that Jesus calls us to do that we would rather not do. Sometimes maybe we do wish Jesus had just stayed a baby. That's the easy part. The hard part is letting him grow up.

Michael Brown, who was the former pastor at Marble Collegiate Church, writes about a hero of his. He was a pastor and a close personal friend of his father's. That minister was in his house all the time when he was growing up and he pretty much idolized him. He was one of the kindest, gentlest human beings Michael ever knew.

After that pastor died, Michael's dad told him a story about his hero pastor. The pastor once confessed that he had an awful childhood. He had a stepmother who resented him and who abused him psychologically, sometimes physically. Often, she would become irrationally angry and lock him in the backyard all night, even if the weather were cold or rainy. He would bang on the door, crying, begging to come in, apologizing, even though he had no idea why she was angry or what he was apologizing for.

But the lights would go out, and the door would remain locked, and he would curl up on a doormat on the back porch and sleep there like the family dog, crying and shivering in the darkness. The next morning, she would open the door and say: "Get dressed for school. There's no time for breakfast. And you better not be late!"

That was how he grew up. And yet somehow, he still grew up to be a fine, well-educated, successful man--and, in fact, to be a Methodist pastor of considerable distinction.

When his stepmother got older, she was confined to a bed by a debilitating illness. Her own children deserted her – refused to have anything to do with her. But you know, that pastor, the one she had treated so inhumanely, took her into his home and looked after her with compassion. He treated her with kindness and constant care, as if she had been the best mom ever. He made sure that her every need was met till the day she died, still living beneath his roof.

Michael said that his dad said to him: "I can't believe you did that for her after how she treated you." And he answered: "I didn't do it just for her. I also did it for myself. I reached a point where the burden of resentment was too heavy to carry around anymore. I couldn't be free of the pain till I was free of the hatred.

“And anyway," he said, "I decided if I cannot love people who make loving difficult, how could I ever stand in a pulpit and preach about love to anyone else?" (Brown, “The Baby Jesus is the Easy Part”).

Isn't that something? That pastor, that man, actually let Jesus grow up and rule his heart and life. That man decided not to stay in the stable looking at a manger but instead follow a grown-up Jesus into the world. “And in so doing, he found freedom from his past and meaning for a lifetime” (Brown).

**"And from you, O Bethlehem, small among the clans of Judah, will come for me one who shall rule his people Israel."**

You see, Michael Brown says that “Christianity is not merely a faith we profess; it is a choice we make about how we will live – about following where Jesus leads--living as Jesus lived--and loving as Jesus loved, even when it would be easier not to.”

So why do I preach this sermon on December 19th, when there are 6 more days until Christmas? Because the question isn't “Are you ready for Christmas?” Christmas is coming whether we are ready or not. I bring this message because ultimately, the real question is “When Jesus gets here, will we let him grow up and follow him? Will we choose to live on the other side of Christmas?”

- Michael Brown's message, “The Baby Jesus is the Easy Part” was a helpful resource for me as I prepared this sermon.



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