

December 24, 2017 Christmas Eve
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Luke 2:1-20

Find the Baby

I couldn't find the baby. It was a couple of days before this year's Sunday School Christmas Play and our fearless director and her trusty assistant were reviewing the set and surveying the props. They had a baby, the baby doll that has been newborn Jesus for who knows how many IPLC Sunday School Christmas plays—there's always a Nativity Scene, it IS the Christmas program—they had a baby doll, but this year they could use another one or two—the plays have wide-ranging themes, these are ambitious productions with various scenes, another doll would help with transitions. “I have a baby!” I said, “I'll bring it tomorrow.”

I went home and looked all around the house, and I couldn't find it. I could picture it, a baby doll my daughter played with years ago and still kept on her bed with a bunch of stuffed animals. But it wasn't there now. Then I remembered how it had gotten crowded near her pillows, so we thinned things out, put some stuff away in the hall closet, way up on the top shelf. I looked up there, and I did find a number of stuffed animals, but no baby. Had I recently seen it in another bedroom, stashed in the corner? Not there either, though there was a pile of clothes to donate, and many other things that needed to be put away. Did we sell it at the garage sale, was it with that stuff downstairs? I didn't think we'd do that, though I did see lots of stuff that didn't sell. Did I give it away? That seemed a vague memory, which I now sharply regretted, felt resentful towards the recipient, who might be imaginary. I was getting really miffed now—at whomever, indeterminate others and also myself, my frustration mounting as I ran up and down stairs and around in circles. I kept seeing lots of stuff, mostly junk, but I could not find the thing I needed, and wanted, and knew I had had, but didn't have now. I couldn't find the baby. It made me feel bad. It made me feel sad.

I was surprised how sad it made me, not finding the baby. Maybe it was the stress leading up to Christmas; maybe it was the desire to complete just one manageable task, maybe a wish to give someone something they'd find helpful. Maybe some of that made me sad. Or maybe not finding the baby called to mind how I'm done having babies; how even my baby is done playing with dolls. There was probably some of that going on as well. But there seemed something more, too. I don't save a lot of things—people who know will confirm this: in certain cleaning moods I can be ruthless, even callous. I don't save many things, but I wished I had saved the baby, thought I had. That I couldn't find it seemed a symbol, its disappearance, or discarding, tied up with something more, a sign of something carelessly and casually lost, and only after it was gone did its significance sink in.

I thought about this, and then I thought, I've been looking for the baby all this past year. Not that baby doll, but what it represents: tenderness, simplicity, gentleness, hopefulness. I've been looking for the baby all this this year as I've been scanning the headlines, this year's roller coaster news, dips and drops, and screaming voices decrying or denying or disbelieving. But even though the news has moved at breakneck pace, it doesn't seem the year has. Last January feels ages ago, doesn't it? Even the end of October seems the distant past. I don't think the year can end soon enough, at least that's what my unconscious has been telling me. In mid-November I had to rip up several checks because I kept writing that it was 2018.

I'm not alone in this. Many people I know have found 2017 tough. Many people I know are just trying to make it through it, after changes in employment, or changes in their relationships, or changes in their health, or in the health of someone they love. Or maybe this

year they lost a loved one, or more than one. We have felt that here at our church, just this past week in a shocking way we can hardly believe, with the sudden loss of someone who's been important to this place for more than a generation, not to mention to her multi-generational home. In all of this it's been hard to remember what day it is, even while the day itself drags on.

Tired, angry, grieving, numb we drag on and wonder, where is the baby? We run up and downstairs and in circles, surrounded by stuff we don't need, looking for it.

We are looking for kindness, amidst brutality and division. We are looking for a still, small voice, amidst so many loud voices talking over each other. We are looking for something pure, amidst ongoing revelations of harassment and misconduct and abuse and worse. We are looking for a feeling we had at a time we can't even remember—when we ourselves were newborn, when we were held in arms that were amazed and secure, and we knew, we don't remember it, but we knew that we were infinitely loved.

I think a lot of people have been looking for that this past year.

It is right that we put away some things, find another place for them, another person who can use them; our lives get messy when we don't. We all grow up, we must grow up, it is good that we do, it's what we want to see: our children grow up, and us, too. But there are things we don't grow out of, ever. We never grow out of the need for love at its most elemental, love at its origin. We never grow out of our need for that—nor for signs that remind us of that, for which there is no better sign than a baby.

I think that's why we come to church on Christmas Eve. We come, looking for the baby. We fear we have lost it, or sold it, or given it away. We feel anxious, or exhausted, or frustrated, or mad, or sad. Or none of these. Or all of these. And we come to church on Christmas Eve, and this is what we hear, we all hear this: "You will find the babe." The proclamation is that sure, that clear, that firm, "You will find the babe," it's declared from the heavens, announced with fearful and brilliant authority: "This will be the sign, you will find the babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in the manger." You will find it: holy innocence and ageless wisdom, joy without borders, love beyond words, the peace that passes understanding, you will find it.

I found the baby. After all my futile searching, I looked, once more, in the place I first thought it was: in the hall closet. It was there, after all, just as I had expected it to be—but it wasn't on the top shelf, as I had expected, it was at the very bottom of the closet, in a corner, under a pile of blankets. It was actually in a garbage bag, which I had not bothered to open up. All of which is an awful lot like Christmas, as, contrary to what we might expect, God does not show up on the top shelf; Godself is not manifest in places of prestige, God appears among the lowly, in an out of the way corner of Judea, in a cattle stall, wrapped under cloths, that's where God appears, in the garbage bags of life, with us.

When I opened up that bag and saw that baby, I was SO happy. I couldn't believe how happy it made me to see that baby, how surprised and relieved I felt—like I should celebrate, like a woman who sweeps her whole house to find one lost coin and then throws a party. I opened up the bag and I laughed out loud, because—I kid you not—I saw not just one baby doll, but a whole bunch of them, of different sizes, and colors, all kinds of baby dolls I'd forgotten we'd had.

We've found two thousand and seventeen baby Jesuses, a baby Jesus every Christmas—and this year, too. If you, like me, have spent the last year looking, you have come to the right place, the first place to look and the final place to be found. If you've been looking all year, be reminded, as I was, that the baby was not lost. And neither are we. That thing we wish we saved, saved us.