Did you know that there is a Wikipedia page dedicated to the theft of baby Jesus?

Stealing the baby Jesus from outdoor manger scenes is somewhat of a holiday tradition...it may even rival caroling as a Christmas tradition nowadays. In 2008, baby Jesus was stolen from First United Methodist Church in a small town in Pennsylvania and replaced with a pumpkin. In Eureka Springs, Arkansas, baby Jesus was secured to a concrete block as a deterrent, but someone simply stole Jesus and along with the block.¹

Stealing baby Jesus has gotten so prevalent that churches and communities have installed security systems. Some churches have even affixed Jesus with GPS tracking devices. In retail establishments, baby Jesus is among the most shoplifted items during the Christmas season. Nobody ever steals the wise men or camels! It’s always baby Jesus. One tv reporter commented: The target of the heist is most frequently Christ. (I know, cheesy bad...)²

Honestly, I’m terribly fascinated by this phenomenon.

What do so many people steal baby Jesus? Is it simply a prank? Or is there something deeper? Are people angry at God or the church? Is it because people perceive a lack of the divine in their lives? Is something missing? Do people perceive God to not be present in some way they believe God should be?

Does stealing baby Jesus help conjure up the presence of God in some way? Does it represent a faltering hope of some kind? Are people searching for the divine?

Is it also because we fail to recognize the presence of God in our everyday lives – because we think that the word ‘everyday’ means ‘nothing special.’

Today’s Gospel says as much: “He was in the world, yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.” So, maybe part of the problem is that we don’t know what we are looking for. And thus we look for God in all the wrong places or just simply miss God altogether.

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The Gospel according to John opens with a nativity story very much unlike the one told by Luke (and Matthew, for that matter). Luke gives us a rich historical account and narrative of the earthly events surrounding the birth of Jesus.

John immerses us in the cosmic reality and mystery of God that undergirds the events of the Nativity. And what John tells us is this:

The Word becoming flesh is THE pivotal event in human history.³
This Word, the utterance of the very breath of God, the Word through which all things came into being, the Word that was with God, the Word that is God, becoming flesh means that people can see, hear, know, and experience God in new ways... ways that were never been possible before that moment.

The relationship between God and humans has been forever changed, expanded, and transformed.

Martin Luther unpacks the depth of this reality in his Christmas Book, writing: “Saint Bernard [of Clairvaux] declared there are here three miracles: that God and man should be joined in this Child; that a mother should remain a virgin; that Mary should have such faith as to believe that this mystery would be accomplished in her… And this is the word of the prophet: “Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.” This is for us the hardest point, not so much to believe that He is the son of the Virgin and God himself, as to believe that this Son of God is ours: Truly it is marvelous in our eyes that God should place a little child in the lap of a virgin and that all our blessedness should lie in him. And this Child belongs to all mankind. God feeds the whole world through a Babe nursing at Mary’s breast.”

God entered the ordinary to make it remarkable. God in the everyday. God in the most vulnerable and unlikely. God born as a child and laid in a manger.

A friend shared with me this past week: “When everything else in the world tells us that power and wealth are what determine everything, God places his very Self into the lap of a teen mom.”

Does that not sound outrageous? Do you see how scandalous the Gospel truly is?

That light would break into the world in such lowliness and vulnerability. That divinity would make its home in a place of tenderness and belong to humanity in such an intimate way.

Think about it from another angle for a moment: every time we gather around this table, God, through some wild mystery, is placed into the palm of your hand?

What does it say to us when we become the Body of Christ through beholding the presence of God in the simple bread and wine that we share with others in this room?

What does it say about where we should search for and find the divine when God makes himself known by breaking into the world as a baby born amongst the cattle of a poor family?

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While pondering on this question, I came across “A Christmas Poem” by Jim Strathdee:
When the song of angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the magi and shepherds
    have found their way home,
The work of Christmas begins:
    To find the lost and lonely one,
    To heal the broken soul with love,
    To feed the hungry children
        with warmth and good food,
    To feel the earth below,
        the sky above!

    To free the prisoner from all chains,
    To make the powerful care,
    To rebuild the nations
        with strength of good will,
    To see God’s children everywhere!

    To bring hope to every task you do,
    To dance at a baby’s new birth,
    To make music in an old person’s heart,
    And sing to the colors of the earth!§

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Christmas is not a one-day, one-time event. The Nativity, the birth of Jesus, is an event that enacts the promises of God that Mary sings about in the Magnificat. The birth of Jesus opens the floodgates of grace in a most remarkable way, giving humans unprecedented and intimate access to the cosmic reality of the divine. Christmas is not simply an event, it is an unfolding love story.

Further, it is an event that should enkindle our hearts with a holy flame. The birth of Jesus is a story to share and proclaim. The Nativity is also a story to seek and find. The work of Christmas, to be able to share that light, requires us to seek and find where God is entering into the world.

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After the late service on Christmas Eve, Jason Cheek grabbed me and motioned towards the nativity scene on the back table. Baby Jesus was missing! I quietly wondered if someone had stolen our baby Jesus. (no worries, he was there by Christmas morning!) It did, though, serve as a reminder and drive home a point for me:

Do not let anyone steal Jesus from you this Christmas. Not the politicians. Not the news or reporters. Not the powerful and rich. Do not let anything distract or mislead you from where God is found. Not the retailers or commercials. Not the gifts or lack thereof. Not fear, anxiety, sickness, or loss.
For unto US a child is born. Jesus belongs to all of humankind. Jesus belongs to you. Jesus belongs to your neighbor, your friend, and the stranger. And we are invited into a most remarkable story.

At the pivotal moment in human history, God became flesh and dwelt among us. At the pivotal moment in human history, God became flesh in lowliness and the divine made its home in a place of tenderness and vulnerability.

So, search for Jesus in the ordinary and everyday. Find Jesus in the most vulnerable and unlikely. A nursing child and a teenage mom. Among poor shepherds and eccentric magi, refugees and the homeless, the hungry and the lonely. For God chooses to make himself known among such as these. Beginning at his birth, through his life, and even today, God in Jesus welcomes sinners and the downtrodden. Jesus blesses and heals, through simple bread, feeding us with his very Self.

Look for light that breaks in from the dark corners and unexpected places. Look for light and life in the most lowly and common…

For God makes the ordinary remarkable.

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1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baby_Jesus_theft
6 Jim Strathdee