



THE LOST JESUS

The Christmas Homily 2025

NARRATOR: Someone has stolen Baby Jesus. The pastor had spent the best part of the previous 24 hours with policemen, board members and answering questions from distraught parishioners. But there were no leads or clues. The manger by the church doors sat empty.

NARRATOR: For years First Church had been famous in town for their outdoor nativity scene. It sat in front of the church during the weeks before Christmas, reminding the shoppers who passed by of the meaning of the season. The congregation felt that the witness of a downtown church was unique and the Nativity Scene was part of their mission.

NARRATOR: The scene itself was quite remarkable. It had been hand-crafted by Old Man Johnson, the wood carver who lived on the edge of town. The beauty and detail he had fashioned into each piece was astounding. You would see the cattle standing by the manger and expect to hear them lowing, waking the baby. You would look at Mary and see the loving awe in her eyes shine back at you. A glance at the weather-weary shepherds would tell you that these were men who were accustomed to spending long nights near their precious herds. The Wise Men on the stable's side would let you know that these three were in some confusion at finding a newborn king in such bare surroundings.

NARRATOR: At the very center was the Baby, the masterpiece of the entire scene. How was it possible that the artist had managed to carve God into human form? How was it possible that a simple piece of wood could be so transformed that you knew as you gazed that the Word of God was—and is—real?

NARRATOR: Yet the Baby in the manger was also very human. There was none of the typically pious falseness often seen in such displays. You could almost hear him crying. The parental desire to reach out and cuddle the Son of God in your arms was overwhelming.

NARRATOR: For many of the people of town, the Nativity Scene had become a way-station during their busy pre-holiday travels. For nearly thirty years it had stood as a beacon, a “life-house” someone had once said, to the holiday worn crowds. It had stood—and survived—some serious difficulties. During the racial strife of the Sixties, the lone black Wise Man became a silent call to harmony. In the uncertain years of First Church itself, when they were declining and on the edge of closing, the promise of God’s presence seemed to shine all the more brightly from the scene.

NARRATOR: In recent years changes had been made to the display. The threat of vandalism and crime forced the erection of a Plexiglas case around it. Many of the long-time members of the church were saddened by the events, but they knew it was essential to protect the valuable works of art the scene had become.

NARRATOR: On that particular Sunday before Christmas, the pastor had arrived early as was his/her custom. He/she enjoyed the quiet calm of the downtown on Sunday mornings and cherished his/her short walk to the church. This year Advent had been special. The pastor could remember other Advents when he/she preached to a small remnant of the faithful. Through it all, he/she and the remaining members believed that they could still be the church, the Word of God made real in their town. Now they were bouncing back from those lean years and were beginning to find their mission in the community. For the fourth year in a row attendance and giving had gone up. The food donations for the needy had overflowed their containers. New missions were about to be started. Yes, the Christmas spirit had certainly invaded Old First Church.

NARRATOR: The pastor neared the Nativity scene with anticipation. There was always that special moment when he/she would look up and see the manger. For him/her that was part of why the church was still alive and still in ministry. That little baby shone with the hope and promise that all God’s people are important. It was a sign during Advent that God is still here. He/she had glanced up and was immediately aware that something was wrong. The padlock was missing; the side panel was standing open. He/she stood for a long moment taking inventory. All seemed fine. Every piece was in its place;

no signs of graffiti or vandalism marred the peace. His/her eyes moved to the manger. The swaddling clothes were still there, wrapped around...

NARRATOR: The baby was gone. Rocks had been put in his place. From a distance, it would have been hard to notice the difference. But Jesus was not there.

NARRATOR: Now, a day and a half later it looked as if the traditions of Christmas Eve would be broken. For many years the manger with baby were brought into the church for the Candlelight service. They would be carried down the main aisle while all were singing the opening hymn. The manger and its heavenly child would be placed reverently in front where all could be reminded of the events that they were celebrating. There was always hushed singing at that mysterious moment. The reality of Christmas would again come alive.

NARRATOR: But not tonight; not this year. A deep sadness seemed to grow within the pastor as he/she finally sat alone in his/her office. He/she knew that traditions did not make Christmas special. But he/she couldn't help but feel that there would be an emptiness to the church that night. They had decided they would still bring the manger into the church. Perhaps there would be enough memory in that to overcome the loss of the baby.

NARRATOR: The hour arrived. The service was about to begin. The pastor took his/her place. He/she prayed quietly as the prelude set the mood. **(Angels We Have Heard on High)** He/she couldn't say that he/she was praying for a miracle, but in his/her distant thoughts he/she knew that was what was needed.

NARRATOR: Yes, it was silly to be so upset about a piece of art. Christmas would still be Christmas. But a loss is always difficult and they were certainly mourning one tonight. (Wait until Angels We Have Heard on High is finished)

NARRATOR: The musician came to the end of the prelude, took a breath, a pause, and began the introduction to **Silent Night**. It sounded more like a lament, than a lullaby. The youth group had set up the empty manger in front of the altar.

NARRATOR: When the youth slowly processed to the front of the church with the empty manger. The pastor could see tears in Old Man Johnson's eyes as he gazed at the empty manger that had cradled his work of love. Others were fighting back their sense of loss. Years of

tradition were gone. It was as if the Lord had left them. (Pause and wait until Silent Night is done)

NARRATOR: The hymn ended and all took their seats. The pastor stood to begin his/her sermon. He/she was going to do his/her pastoral best to ease the pain, to lead them to see what Christmas was about, even this year.

Pastor: *"Yes, we have lost the baby Jesus from the manger. We are feeling our loss. A part of our church's life is not with us tonight. But, and no disrespect is meant, it was just a piece of wood. Expertly and lovingly carved, yes. But it was not the Lord. The baby IS present. The Word has become flesh—for all time. The Lord is here. Not in the manger, but within us." (He/she paused and took a long look across the crowded sanctuary.) "All we are called to do is believe."*

NARRATOR: But he/she was having a hard time doing that. He/she finished his/her brief words and nodded to the pianist for the service to continue. As he/she turned back to the congregation he/she saw a young girl stand up in the back row. She was wearing well-worn clothes that were probably hand-me-downs. She was from the new family that had recently moved into the old apartments a block from the church.

Young girl with the doll in the blanket begins to move slowly to the manger

NARRATOR: She threaded her way through the knees and feet in the pew and reached the aisle. (As the cantor began to sing).

O Come, All Ye Faithful, Joyful and Triumphant

NARRATOR: The words seemed to give her the energy to move forward, overcoming a lingering shyness. She moved slowly, uncertain, as if she was sure someone was about to reach out and stop her.

NARRATOR: The pastor watched, uncertain about it all. Should he/she walk down and talk to her, to see what was the matter? It usually was the younger ones who would start roaming the aisles during the service. It was clear she had something in mind.

(The cantor continued to sing.)

O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord

NARRATOR: Then, one by one, the people began to notice the child. A girl, carrying a bundle, never taking her eyes off her destination.

NARRATOR: She reached the front and gave a glance at the pastor who was still watching from the pulpit. Walking to the empty manger, she knelt down, slowly took the bundle from her arms, and placed it where the baby used to lie. It was an old doll; it may have been handed down to her from an older sister. It was not expensive, nor was it particularly pretty. Clearly it was special. She patted it; a tear and a smile merged on her face. She kissed it then covered it gently, stood up and turned to walk back to her seat.

NARRATOR: The sanctuary was quiet. All eyes were on her as she headed to her parents. She stopped, turned and took one last look at the manger, then sat down. The pause may have lasted just a few seconds, but it is remembered to this day as an eternal moment of awe and joy. The pianist regained her composure and picked up where she had left off. (The cantor sang as she/he had never sung before.)

O come let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord.

NARRATOR: (Pause and wait until the song is done) No one knows what happened to the original wood-carved baby. No clues were ever found. It has long-since been put in the unsolved crimes file at the police station. But the manger has not remained empty. To this day, there is a well-worn, and deeply loved doll that lies there each Christmas. It may not look real, it may not have the beauty of a fine work of craftsmanship, but it brings many a tear to the eye, and a lump to the throat. It is said that if you look closely, you can even see God.

Sing: Away in the Manger #448 (verses 1 and 3)