

Simply Christmas



Recovering Jesus

by Tony Campolo

A friend of mine had his TV turned on one morning in early December when he was taken aback by the strange announcement of a newscaster. "I have something disturbing to report," were the words that caught his attention. "Someone has stolen Jesus! Sometime between midnight and three in the morning, someone took Jesus from the manger scene that sits outside the county courthouse. If anyone in our television audience has any information that could lead to recovering Jesus, please contact this station as soon as possible. We very much want to get Jesus back where he belongs."

It doesn't take much of an imagination to be amused by that announcement or to glean all kinds of messages from it. Each Christmas it is easy to get a sense that Jesus has been taken away or gotten lost amidst all our harried activities, decorations, and presents. During the holiday season, we may want to put Jesus back in the center of things where He belongs, but we all know that recovering Jesus involves more than getting some plastic Jesus returned to a crib on the lawn of a courthouse in St. Louis.



If the real Jesus is going to be recovered this Christmas, we will have to make room for Him in our hearts and minds. Whether that plastic imitation is ever found only has symbolic meaning, but making room in our lives for the real Jesus is what is desperately needed.

Each morning try to make room for Jesus through centering prayer. I empty my mind of extraneous thoughts and try to create that sacred space that the ancient Celtic Christians called "the thin place." I establish a subjective condition wherein there is receptivity for an invasion by Bethlehem's Jesus, and when in stillness that invasion occurs, I experience a wonder-filled recovery of the real Jesus. This, unquestionably, is the best of all second comings.

No one can celebrate a genuine Christmas

without being truly poor. The self-sufficient, the proud, those who, because they have everything, look down on others, whose who have no need even of God — for them there will be no Christmas. Only the poor, the hungry, those who need someone to come on their behalf, will have that someone. That someone is God, Emmanuel, God-with-us. Without poverty of spirit there can be no abundance of God.

—Oscar Romero

Because of his boundless love, Jesus became what we are that he might make us to be what he is.

Irenaeus
3rd century

Away In A Stank Manger

by Shane Claiborne

The Department of Licenses and Inspections (L&I) visits us on occasion at The Simple Way community—to cut down our endangered trees, to fine us for cracks in the sidewalk, or to let us know according to city ordinance “it is illegal to invite guests into your home to eat.” (For the record, most of you readers are also criminals for the same reason!) It could all make for a great sitcom.

But here's the newest twist: OUR INSPECTOR'S NAME IS “JESUS” (pronounced “hey-SOOS”). He's not a Galilean peasant, but a young, clean-cut Latino guy from North Philly. But that's not all. Our lawyer handling these theatrics with the City is a friend named Ralph Pinkus who happens to be Jewish (and one of the best real estate lawyers in the city, thanks be to Yahweh!). Ralph and I were joking the other day, and he said giggling: “Well, Jesus isn't helping you out of this one.” We laughed hysterically, and you can imagine we've kept the Jesus-jokes rolling ever since.

It is just like our God to use a Jewish lawyer to save a Christian non-profit from violating the codes of an Inspector named Jesus, here in the City of Brotherly Love. Ha!

The world is groaning this Christmas. The world is groaning in the pains of childbirth as the Scriptures say. We are not simply celebrating the birth of a baby 2000 years ago. We are also in labor, giving birth to the Kingdom of God, on Earth.

This month we are having a Christmas service entitled: “Away in a Stank Manger,” to remind ourselves that the birth of Jesus was not pretty. Children were being killed by Herod. Jesus' family was forced to flee, born a baby refugee on the run

from oppressive rulers, born literally in the dung of our world.

A pastor friend of mine, Wayne Gordon, of Lawndale Community Church, in Chicago told me a story. He had become so troubled by all the distractions of Christmas—buying, decorating, indulging. He struggled with what to do for their Christmas service to stay true to the story. He decided to remind everyone of the filthy reality of the Christ-birth, so before the service, instead of decorating as usual, he spread out cow manure under all the pews. As people came in and sat down dressed in their best attire, they looked at

each other awkwardly, as if someone needed some antacids. At first people squirmed and shifted uncomfortably. As time went on, they mystically remembered the lowly life of the homeless baby.

This is the Jesus we celebrate at Christmas—the one who was born in a stank manger, who told stories where Jewish lawyers and Samaritan women could be heroes. Everyone was surprised, scandalized by the One who rolled around in the

dirt with children. We celebrate the one who refused the temptation to call fire down from heaven—and died the detestable execution reserved for traitors, insurrectionists, bandits, and failed messiahs with the world mocking, laughing, spitting on him. Indeed, we will undoubtedly find ourselves much more likely to meet Jesus this Christmas in the stench of manure or the filth of the ghetto than we are to meet Him in the best decorated sanctuary or the most festive shopping mall.

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