

# Little Tiny Baby, Great Big World

1/2/2022

Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Preaching on:

Luke 2:41–52

When I was about twelve years old, my family took a vacation to Canada. We were going to Prince Edward Island or Nova Scotia or somewhere and the way we got there was by taking a long ferry ride on a BIG boat that we drove onto. It was a stormy day, and the seas were rough and everyone on this boat was feeling a little grey and lackluster.

I don't really understand how this worked, but somehow once this ferry was far enough out in the water, it also transformed into a casino. So, let's recap: long trip, big boat, adults distracted by

seasickness, 12-year-old boy, casino.

Now, despite being in international waters or wherever we were, there was still some draconian measure in place that prevented 12-year-olds from gambling with the adults. So, a staff member directed me to the children's gambling section filled with a bunch of no-guts, no-glory slot machines deemed harmless enough for the grammar-school crowd. No thanks. As of that moment, the only gamble that interested me was the one where I snuck into the real casino and pulled the arm of a real slot machine. In a crowded commotion of queasy adults, I snuck past the defenses and into a dark, smoky corner of slot-machine heaven--*where no one would ever find me.*

If you've ever become separated from your child or from a child you were close to, I'm sure you can sympathize with how my poor mother and father were feeling at that particular moment, in high seas, with their child nowhere to be found. It must have been something like what Mary and Joseph were feeling when their slightly more wholesome 12-year-old snuck off to the Temple rather than the casino. The only difference was that I ran out of money long before Jesus ran out of questions.

And when I saw my mother's tears and my father's scowl, I decided strategically that this was not the right moment to ask for more quarters, as I had planned to do. My dad went off to let the captain know that I had not, in fact, fallen overboard. And my mom just held onto me and cried. Moms, right? She told me that she was afraid that a gust of wind might have blown me into the ocean, and I rolled my eyes, and I still do, but I also felt for the first time that this whole growing up thing was really taking a toll on my poor mom. So, when she made me promise that I would never do anything like that again, I said OK, even though I felt myself starting to be called out from the security of my little family into that bright, neon, flashy, risky gamble called the World.

And these parental instincts never disappear. In my early thirties, my mom and dad came to visit me in the city where I was well established. And after I dropped my parents off at their hotel in Midtown, Mom suggested that she and my dad should walk me the three blocks back to the subway to make sure I got on OK. These instincts, this tension will always be with us.

And as Christians, cherishing the baby Jesus who has just been born to us again, we can have similar instincts and reactions. Being among the first shepherds to kneel down at the manger, or wandering with the Wise Ones following a star and a hope, or feeling Jesus conceived and born within us anew is a profoundly powerful, emotional, and intimate experience—one which our instincts and our faith seem to say we should hold onto, guard, protect—don't let him out of your sight! So, sometimes, Jesus, the *Light of the World* feels like *MY* light—and it's just a little infant light, so precious and so precarious in the darkness which threatens to overcome it that *I* must protect *it* from the world. And after all, if Jesus is *my personal* savior, shouldn't he be sticking close by me? When I was saved, wasn't there a non-compete clause of some kind in there? Isn't Jesus mine, all mine?

Sometimes we start telling ourselves this story. Jesus is pure and simple. The world is fallen and complicated. And so there are places that our pure and simple boy ought not to go. We're in control, you see? If not us, then who? And if we're God's parents (and not the other way around), we're going to need to pin God down. We want to be able to say with objective accuracy about Jesus or our own spiritual journey: here, but not there; this, but not that. Jesus is the Emmanuel, which means God *with* us. But sometimes we want to read that as Emmanuel, God with *us*, but not with *them*.

When take Jesus the Salvator Mundi, the Savior of the World, who is joined with us in the project of preparing this world for the coming Kingdom of God, and shrink him into just a personal totem who reflects me more than he redeems me, I'm going to need to post a guard around that small and vulnerable vision of God. So, we surround Jesus with Christian soldiers ready to do battle to defend him where he is and conquer the places where we have determined that he is not. But the baby Jesus wasn't born in a fortress surrounded by legions of soldiers. He was born in a barn, laid down in a feeding trough, into a perilous world, surrounded by shepherds.

When I was a kid, I learned to draw by reading comic books. So, whenever I drew people, they were covered with these big, bulging muscles and they were shooting death rays out of their eyes and things like that. This style even made its way into my religious art. My boyhood Jesus was just this ripped and powerful superhero. It's comforting to think of Jesus like Superman or Hercules—the kind of guy sent into the world to “clean house.” Wouldn't it be nice if that's what Jesus had been doing when his parents found him in the temple—kicking butt and taking names? But instead of displays of power and feats of strength, Luke says Jesus was just sitting there, hanging out. Instead of stealing the show, it says that Jesus was just listening—listening and asking questions. And Fear rises up in us and says to us, “This poor sucker doesn't stand a chance out there.”

Jesus, Mary and Joseph have just learned, has come not to be born only into their hearts, into their family, but to be born into the whole world and to everybody. Let's face it—it's risky and it might be heartbreaking to be a part of a family like that. Let's face it—we don't like everybody! But in the Temple Jesus identifies his true parentage. He's not God's parent. God is his parent. And he steps beyond the traditional boundaries of family into the big, messy family of all of us—a whole world that Jesus has come not to conquer, but to make himself available to, to sit with, to listen to, to ask questions of, and to serve.

One of the most beautiful things about the Temple where Jesus snuck off to was that there was a room right in the heart of it called the Holy of Holies. The room was behind a beautiful curtain, and no one was allowed to go in there except the high priest once a year because the Holy of Holies was the room where God was. I think that's so audacious that it's just stunningly beautiful. This is the room where God lives. Where's God, you ask. Right over here, behind the curtain, is the presence of the God of the universe. Wow.

Incredible. Still, our spiritual sensibilities have changed a lot in the intervening thousands of years. Imagine if we invited people into church and showed them a room or an altar or a box—anything, and told them this is where God is, God's right here. Look no further. What would people think of us?

Don't believe the big culture lie. The big culture lie is that we're all becoming more secular, and people are less interested in God than ever before. That's just not true. People nowadays just have different expectations, different language, different experiences, different opportunities, different theologies. They drive past our church and everything about the church says, "God is in here." That was once the most audacious and attractive thing any church or temple could have ever claimed. People heard that message. It resonated. But nowadays a lot of people have stopped believing you can stick God in a box, or behind a curtain, or inside the walls of any one church.

Part of the postmodern condition is believing that God is so lost that anyone who says, "I know just where God is, I've got God right over here," must be nuts, or running a scam. And so in order for people to experience the very same God that I experience, I have let that God out of my box. And what's wrong with that? Did Jesus just sit around in one place? Did he only hang around with respectable religious sorts? Wasn't he always moving? So, what would it look like if we believed that Jesus was more present outside these walls than inside them? How would that change the way we think about ministry? How might that change the message?

And when the hungry world shows up at our door and says, "Where's God in all this mess? Tell me, is Jesus real? What's the point of all your prayers? Where's the meaning in all your beliefs? Show me the beauty, the truth, and the goodness that I'm longing for but can't find," we could say to them, "Follow us out the door, and down the street a little. We'll show you where to find Jesus. He's not lost. He's just over here."