

Little Lord Jesus

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
Olentangy Church
Columbus, Ohio
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Scripture Readings

Isaiah 9:2-7
Matthew 1:18-25
Titus 2:11-14

Sermon

When you visit a new mother and she asks if you want to hold the baby, could you ever say no? It's so wonderful to hold a baby, to cradle a day-old infant in your arms! To look into the newly-opened eyes. To feel the tender skin. To hear the little grunts and squeaks. Who could say no to a baby?

THIS TIME OF YEAR, IT'S NATURAL for us to hold on to baby Jesus, to hold on while we can, to hold on and not let go. Babies grow up so fast. *Jesus, don't be in a hurry; stay helpless and adorable. Jesus, don't grow up just yet; we can wait.*

We want to hold on to baby Jesus. But at the same time, we know we have to be responsible. We have to be mature. We have to let the baby grow up.

It's not a baby who will be called *Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace*. It's not a baby who will take on Caesar and Satan and sin. It's not a baby who will take his seat on David's throne and reign forever. It's not a baby who will take up a cross.

So we need to let baby Jesus, we need to let little Lord Jesus, grow up.

BUT NOT SO FAST. If we don't spend time with baby Jesus, if we rush Jesus to maturity, if we jump from the manger to the kingdom and the cross – if we do that, Joseph disappears from the story.

As far as the gospels are concerned, Joseph is only around until Jesus is about twelve years old. After that, Joseph recedes from view. So if we don't linger in the first two chapters of Matthew and in the first two chapters of Luke, if we don't let Jesus stay baby Jesus for a while, then we lose sight of Joseph. And that's not a good thing.

THE STORY OF JESUS' BIRTH IS A STORY OF GOD AT WORK. God and no one else makes the birth of Jesus happen. But God is not the only one who takes action in this story. There is also Mary. By her willingness and by her embrace of God's purpose, Mary is the first to receive the Christ. In this way, Mary is not only the mother of the Lord, but also the mother of all the faithful.

BUT MARY IS NOT THE ONLY human actor in the story. There's also Joseph. Like Mary, Joseph had a visitation by an angel. Like Mary, Joseph said yes to the angel's message. And like Mary, Joseph's life was turned upside down.

This time next year, Peter Jackson's latest Tolkien film is expected in theaters. Many of us have been waiting for it. It's called *The Hobbit*.

Now if there's one thing about hobbits, it's that they are stay-put sort of creatures. Hobbits don't travel very far. And hobbits certainly don't have adventures. I imagine Joseph wasn't much different. And that probably made Joseph like most every other man in Nazareth.

For Joseph, traveling would be limited to the duties of religious observance and the requirements of imperial compulsion. There was only one reason that Joseph took Mary and went to Bethlehem. He was ordered to do so. But adventures? That would be the last thing Joseph or his fellow-villagers would want. Adventures meant disruption and danger. Life was already uncertain. Survival was a precarious business. Adventures would only upset the delicate balance that permitted a craftsman like Joseph to eke out a living. Adventures would not be welcome.

But once the angel appeared to Joseph and once Joseph said yes to the angel's message, the adventures began. First, Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem with Mary. Journeys were never easy in the first century. And the difficulty would only be multiplied by the late stage of Mary's pregnancy. But Joseph did what was expected of him, expected both by Caesar and by God.

And the trip to Bethlehem wasn't the end of it. That was only the first step of the adventure.

NOT EVERYONE IS HAPPY when a baby is born, especially certain people and especially with certain babies. A baby who was to be the Messiah, who was to be Israel's king – that sort of baby would not be welcome as far as the current king was concerned. No king wants to surrender power. Herod was no different.

When Joseph was warned that Herod wanted to kill the baby Jesus, that's when the real adventure began. Off they went. Like his Old Testament namesake, Joseph took his family down to Egypt.

Egypt. That was an exotic destination, almost mythological in stature. Egypt was the setting for the greatest story Joseph knew, the story of Israel's slavery and Israel's salvation. And now here he was, taking Mary and the baby Jesus, the one the angel said embodied God's salvation – here Joseph is taking them and going down to Egypt, to the place of captivity.

This was not what Joseph had bargained for. Not when he assumed the responsibilities of adulthood. Not when he pledged himself to Mary. Not even when he said yes to the angel and agreed to take Mary into his home rather than divorce her.

There's something about Jesus, even baby Jesus – his eyes newly-opened, seeing for the first time; his skin silky soft; his voice a mixture of grunts and squeaks – there's something even about baby Jesus, something that turns Joseph's world upside down.

If Mary is a model of faithfulness for all the faithful, then Joseph is too. And his experience stands as an emblem of what we might expect if we say yes to the angel, if we say yes to the news about Jesus, if we say yes to the baby himself, yes to little Lord Jesus.

THIS IS THE SEASON when everyone glows over sweet little Jesus, the same way we all glow over any newborn infant. But Jesus, even baby Jesus, is a threat. Jesus came to fulfill great, old promises. But there's more to it than that. Baby Jesus himself is a promise, the kind of promise that sends a stir into the world.

Our world is built on structures and assertions of power. The notion of the one percent versus the ninety-nine percent is nothing new. The same sort of arrangement has prevailed throughout history. The percentages may vary, but always it's the rich and the powerful over against the poor and the weak, the rich and the powerful over against those who are struggling in the middle.

But baby Jesus is a promise, a promise of bad news for the rich and the powerful. The rich will be sent away empty (cf. Luke 1:53). The powerful will be torn down from their thrones (cf. Luke 1:52). And this isn't just a slogan. And it's not just a populist a dream. It's a promise, a promise embodied in the baby Jesus himself.

LOOK! THE BABY JESUS OVERTURNS even the foundational power structure of the world. God, Almighty God, the power in the universe, becomes powerless, becomes a helpless infant. Stripped of his royal robes, all he has is torn strips of cloth wrapped around his wriggling infant form. Shorn of his warrior's armor, all he has is silky smooth skin. His authoritative word silenced, all he has are grunts and squeals.

This makes him a threat, even as a baby. A threat because he is a promise, a promise that the days of the powerful are numbered, even the days of Caesar and Satan and sin! It's no wonder, when something this disruptive comes into the world – it's no wonder, when Joseph says yes, that his world is turned upside down and he finds himself adventuring to Egypt.

AND IF WE SAY YES TO JESUS? if we truly welcome him, if we welcome what even his infant form promises, what adventure awaits us? Probably not the swords and the bullets of assassins. But maybe enough to turn our lives upside down anyway.

Suppose God's grace grips us. Suppose, as promised, God's grace *teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.* Suppose God's grace fashions us into *a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good* (Titus 2:12,14). That could turn our world upside down. It really could!

Imagine rejecting what the structures of wealth and power have established in our world. Imagine saying no to what passes for a normal and respectable way of life in Columbus and its suburbs. Imagine refusing to live for health and wealth and self. Imagine refusing to foot the bill for the self-serving projects of empire. Imagine instead

embracing the adventure of faith, hope, and love, the adventure of following Jesus in the ways of the kingdom.

It's not very hobbit-like, I know. But God hasn't called us to be hobbits. God has called us, like Joseph, to say yes and to go where faithfulness leads.