

Sermon: Stealing the Baby Luke 2:1-20 Christmas Eve, 2019
Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON - Rev. Steve Clifton



In the year 1223, in the Italian town of Greccio, a monk and mystic named Francis of Assisi created the first nativity scene. We are used to them now, but Francis' first nativity was an innovation in its time: a manger, a baby, Mary and Joseph, shepherds and animals all in a stable, all brought to life, in 3 dimensions, to help ordinary people connect with the Gospel story in a new way.

Inspired by a trip to Bethlehem and to the cave that tradition says is the birthplace of the Savior, Francis set up a manger inside a cave, and included a live ox and donkey beside the manger so that all could see that Christ was born in simplicity, that Jesus was born into the ordinary and the common. Jesus was born for all...

Nativity scenes continue to part of the modern Christmas celebrations.

Some are traditional. Some bring a modern message.



An American church created a provocative nativity, with Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus, each on their own, separated in cages, a reminder that the Christmas story is about poor people, vulnerable people, who soon will flee Bethlehem as refugees into Egypt. This nativity is meant to draw attention to the plight of refugees and of the poor in our world now.



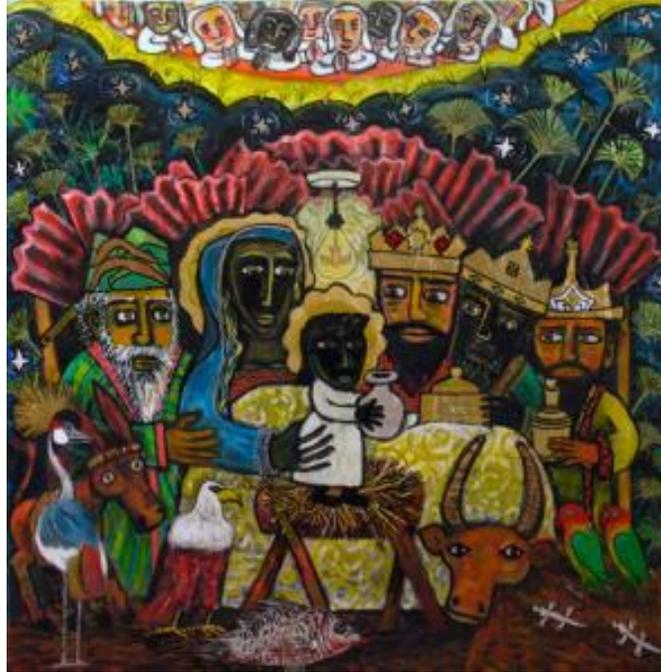
The contemporary artist named Banksy artist created a nativity in Bethlehem, next to the Border wall separating Israel and Palestine; it's called "the Scar of Bethlehem" and is a call for peace in the land of Christ's birth...



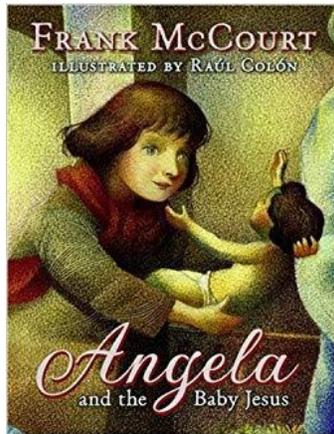
Pope Francis drew attention to a particular nativity scene this Advent, one that depicts the nativity in a particular way. It's called *Let Mum rest...*



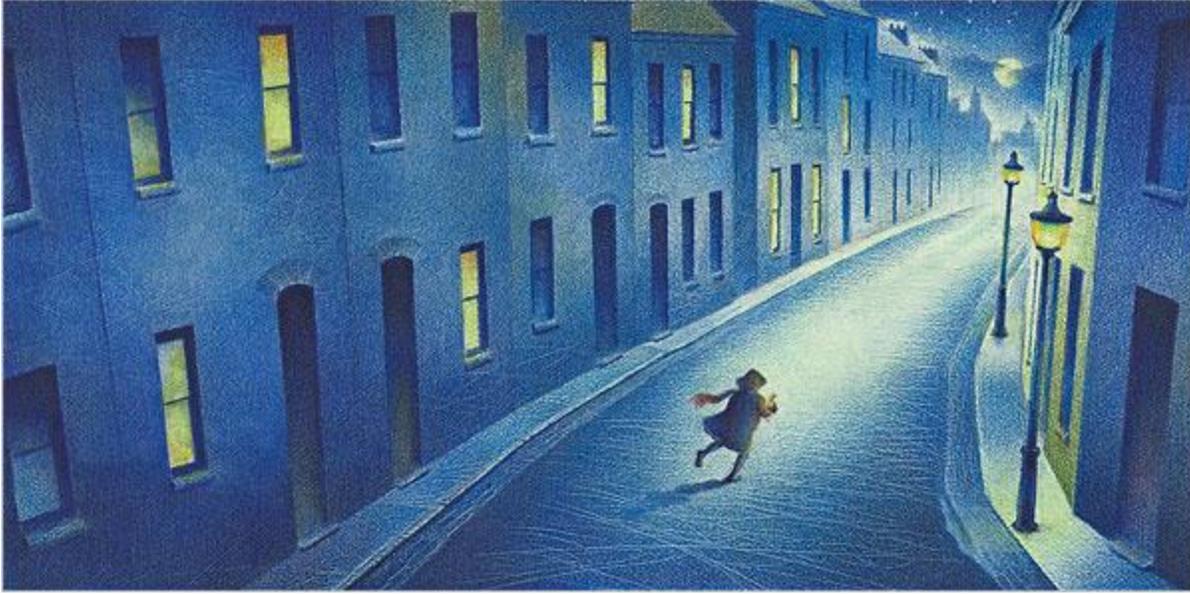
The nativity is sometimes depicted 2 dimensions by artists, placed in different places as a reminder that Christ is born for the whole world- as in Canadian artist William Karlie's series *the Northern Nativity*



The Nativity is reimagined by artists in different cultures to remind us that Christ is born for all people... as in the Ethiopian nativity.



One of my favorite Christmas stories is a children's book called *Angela and the Baby Jesus*, by Irish author Frank McCourt. When McCourt's mother, Angela, was just a girl of 6, growing up in Limerick, Ireland, she stole the baby Jesus from the nativity manger of her church. It was a cold December, and she worried that the newborn Christ would catch cold, so she took the nativity baby from its manger and brought it home to where it was warm. Of course people soon noticed the empty manger and assumed that the baby was stolen.



And it's not just in children's books that we find a stolen baby Jesus. In the modern day people often steal the baby Jesus from the manger in nativity scenes.

- A pub in England launched an appeal this December, as a one of their patrons removed the baby from their nativity.
- In Chicago, the baby Jesus is now chained to the manger in their municipal nativity, because people kept taking him away.
- In Wisconsin, several nativity babies have been stolen this December, apparently because the thief is a liturgical purist who believes strongly that the baby Jesus should not be placed in the manger before Christmas Eve.
- A Florida city has placed a GPS device in their nativity Jesus so that when he is taken the police can track him down.



In some traditions the baby Jesus is taken from the manger with great intent. Mexican Christians remove the baby from the manger after Christmas with some ceremony on the feast of Candlemas.

And then the baby is dressed and decorated and taken to church to mark the fact that when Christmas ends, Jesus does not stay in the manger.

The baby in the nativity manger grows to be a man who speaks of and demonstrates the overflowing love and grace of God, who brings light and hope and peace to a world that longs for these things, who defies tradition and welcomes the outcast and those on the margins into the center of life, who offers healing and acceptance and compassion to all of God's children whoever they may be...



Tonight we celebrate the birth of a baby, born in a stable, laid in a manger.

But when we leave here tonight, we really should take the baby home with us. It's okay, even a good thing to steal the baby from the manger. The manger cannot keep him. Jesus is for everyone, in every culture, time, place and circumstance. The birth of Jesus is for you.

So... let's all take the baby Jesus home with us tonight.

Merry Christmas!!!

Amen!