

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Please be seated. I read a story in the papers last year about towns in the Midwest, and this story has inspired my sermon tonight. It was a story about towns that have very large nativity scenes, replete with a full cast of characters, the baby, Mary, Joseph shepherds, wise men, and a whole range of animals. Sheep, donkeys, camels, you get the idea. But in recent years, the towns, and this is across the Midwest, apparently, have been troubled by a craze that's broken out. People have been stealing the baby Jesus from the nativities. Now, the article I was reading investigated this phenomenon, and there was a wide range of responses to the situation. In West Bend, Indiana, all the figures had been bolted down. Jennifer Smith from Kingsport, Tennessee was quoted as saying, "There's no way someone can take Jesus". Ms. Smith installed security glass. Well, security cameras and plexiglass, as a deterrent.

Others had equipped the figures in the nativity with a global positioning scheme, GPS, so that wherever they moved, they could track their whereabouts. Kurt Buick, pastor of Emmanuel Baptist church in West Virginia decided to embrace the problem. He didn't watch the film provided by the security cameras looking at his nativity. He kept simply replacing the baby Jesus with another one every time the baby was stolen. He said, "I can't think of a better way to get the Christmas message across than for people to keep taking Jesus home".

I like this approach, but I was intrigued by the idea of installing a GPS on the baby Jesus. It got me thinking. What would happen if the real baby Jesus had been equipped with a GPS? What would it have shown? Well, it would have shown that the infant Jesus didn't stay long in Bethlehem. He soon had to escape to Egypt to avoid persecution. Then after a few years in Egypt, the GPS would have shown less movement, as Jesus seemed to live a quiet life in Nazareth, but the activity on the system would have perked up about 30 years later. Suddenly it would have shown a lot more activity. Jesus started to move around the country. There were occasional trips to Jerusalem, but most of the time he was traveling round unfashionable parts of the country.

After three years of intense movement, the GPS would locate Jesus in Jerusalem, outside the city, in the place reserved for the execution of common criminals. And the last movement the GPS would record would have

been the short journey to a tomb, where the signal would go quiet for three days. The signal, however, would only transmit for those three days from the tomb, because on the third day, something amazing happened. Jesus was raised to life in a moment so wondrous and so mysterious that I guarantee no GPS system could survive. The system would have melted.

We're here this evening, not just because of the birth of Jesus. We're here because of what he came to be, and especially because of his death and resurrection. Our celebrations are in the context of a Eucharist in which we call to mind and celebrate the story of his last days. It's because Jesus broke the bonds of death and won for us the promise of new life, that we celebrate his birth. It's the resurrection of Jesus which makes the Christmas story not just significant, but relevant to our lives now. The baby grew up, died, and was raised to life and is with us now by his spirit.

What we celebrate this evening is not simply an historical event. It's also a present reality. Jesus was named Emmanuel, which means God with us. He came amongst us in Bethlehem, and he's with us now. He comes to us by his spirit. We don't come to church on Christmas Eve just to remember a birth from a long time ago. We're not merely here to wish Jesus a happy birthday. We're meeting to celebrate the fact that this child grew up, and won for us the promise of new life. The God who came to us in Bethlehem still lives with us by his spirit. So Pastor Buick was right. There is no better way of celebrating Christmas than taking Jesus home. Amen.