



# THE UNEXPECTED NATIVITY

JIM BLACK

It was Christmas Eve in south Florida. Because the weather is usually warm and summer-like—especially to a northern-born transplant like me—people tend to go all out with their decorations in order to create a holiday atmosphere. (Think Chevy Chase in the movie *Christmas Vacation*.) It's always fun to drive around to see the incredible displays of Christmas decorations. At our house we only put up the old-fashioned fat lights with primary colors, much to the dismay of my two boys, who hope for something bigger. It's my nostalgic moment every year to hang up those lights.

As I was delivering a basket of food and toys to a family that our church was sponsoring, I drove by a now-familiar nativity scene. There was Mary, Joseph, the angels and shepherds, and right in the middle, the baby Jesus, all sitting serenely on the roof of the strip club.

The first time I had seen this particular nativity scene was two years earlier, and I had laughed at the sight—it just didn't seem to fit. The next year I wondered what the owners of the club were thinking that they would do this. And on this Christmas Eve I just had to find out.

I noticed that the door to the club

was open. It was around three in the afternoon, and I parked my car and walked to the door, glancing nervously over my shoulder. What if someone saw me, a pastor, walking into this den of sin in broad daylight? Would anyone understand? Would my career be over? I peeked inside, wondering what I would find.

To my relief, the club was not open and there was a Christmas party being held for the staff—with everyone fully clothed! I asked for the owner, and a woman around sixty years old approached me. I introduced myself, and I said how much I admired the nativity scene on her roof. She began to tell me about her belief in God, and how much she needed the Lord's help in her life. I hadn't planned what I was going to say, and I didn't feel the Lord prompting me to preach to her in any way about the obvious incongruity of the scene.

I told her I was a pastor and encouraged her to keep on talking with and listening to Jesus. She had tried to go to church before, but she just didn't feel like she belonged there—she knew what they would think of her if they ever found out what she did for a living. I told her she was welcome at our

church anytime. After wishing each other a Merry Christmas I turned to leave. She thanked me for stopping in, and she told me that she had never really talked with a pastor before.

As I drove away, the strip club nativity scene in my rearview mirror, I suddenly realized just how much it fit. Jesus didn't come to the world to stay away from sinners (myself included). He was born right into the middle of the filth, pain, and longing of humanity. He loved sinners, they loved him. He lived with them, touched them—they were the reason he came. It was in the religious world that he didn't fit.

I wish I could say that the owner of the club came to church and was transformed that Christmas, but I never saw her again, and the club was soon closed. As I prayed for her that day I realized that our meeting was for *my* benefit.

If Jesus came again today for the first time, where would he be found? In a beautiful church? Or in a place that would be as scandalous and confusing as the roof of a local strip club? In my mind I heard him saying to me, "I really *do* love the world. Go and do likewise." ◦

Jim Black is pastor of Hope Community Covenant Church in Boynton Beach, Florida.