

New nativity figures for the holidays

By Nate Smelle

Looking out the window at St. Paul's United Church in Bancroft just prior to the service on Sunday, Dec. 10, one of the ushers realized the nativity scene out front seemed to be missing one of its key figures.

Alerted to the situation, Rev. Lynn Watson said she noticed a set of large footprints in the freshly fallen snow, leading to and from where the cutout of Mary and Jesus had been.

Taking a photo with her phone, she uploaded it to her Facebook page and headed for the pulpit to deliver her service.

After the service she checked in on social media and was disappointed with what she found.

‘Absolutely awful!’ ‘Disrespectful!’ ‘Shameful!’ ‘I hope when you catch them that you make a spectacle of them right on the corner, so everyone can see,’ some of the comments read.

Watson could not understand the angry response.

‘Yes, I felt bad for the folks who had worked so hard to refurbish our 40-year-old nativity scene; the town who had helped to make sure they were installed, but I didn't see it as either disgusting, or disrespectful, or worthy of public shaming. This whole Christian stuff is totally about forgiveness, and mercy and redemption – you can screw up, but you're not a screw-up.’

Despite the aggression and vengefulness that manifested in a few individuals following the theft, there were plenty of others in the community who appreciated the comedic side of the story.

Some joked that Herod was responsible; others that Mary was headed for Bethlehem for Christmas; others yet that Mary had skipped town because she could not afford to raise her child in Bancroft considering the high rates for water and wastewater.

Jokes aside, Watson said she began to recognize a more serious side to the story talking with a Jewish friend of hers who pointed out the symbolism of the plywood cutouts.

This conversation compelled her to contemplate the significance of the symbol of Mary.

Emphasizing that she was far more than just the mother of Jesus, Watson appreciates Mary as a powerful and visionary symbol for feminists in 2017.

‘Her autonomy is revolutionary,’ Watson said.

‘The men who started the Christian church really relegated Mary to just the fact that she was a virgin. Which then meant that the only kind of women God could use were innocent virginal women. The power of her story is that this young woman made a decision about her life and body, and didn't ask permission from her dad, or her brothers, or her intended husband. It was an unmediated encounter with God that conceived in her the hope of the world.’

Watson described Mary's faith as ‘exemplary,’ acknowledging that she put her reputation, word and life on the line to be a participant in God's justice and mercy for the poor, marginalized and oppressed. The lessons Mary's life represent are relevant today considering the state of the world, she said.

Watson said the fact she now has the opportunity to share these lessons with the community is one good thing to arise from the theft.

Though the original cutouts have yet to be located, Watson was delighted to find a new cutout of Mary and baby Jesus in its place on the morning of Saturday, Dec. 16.

‘I'm just amazed at the interest and investment of the community in the missing Mary, and especially the person who decided he or she would provide a replacement,’ said Watson.

‘All of it is steeped in generous mystery. God loves to use surprises.’