

THE BROKEN JESUS



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I broke the baby Jesus. I'm not proud of it, but it's true. It happened last year at my grandparents' house. I spent the night, and then early the next morning, I got up and went straight for Jesus in the manger.

by CHRIS FABRY

I COULDN'T HELP MYSELF. Papaw said I could move the sheep and the donkey but not to touch Jesus or His parents or the wise men. But that morning I grabbed the manger, and when Mamaw called me to breakfast, I put Jesus in the chair with me, right under my leg where He'd be safe.

I didn't mean for anything bad to happen. In fact, I took right good care of Him for a while. I kept lifting my leg, looking to make sure He was all right, but I guess I got distracted by the back of the cereal box or the salt and pepper shakers. The pepper is a rooster and the hen is the salt. I get to play with them all I want.

Anyway, when I got up from the table to take my bowl to the sink, I plumb forgot Jesus was with me, and He fell on the tile floor. The manger went one way and Jesus went the other. I just stood there looking down. I couldn't look up at Mamaw and Papaw.

They didn't haul off and yell or anything, but I kind of wish they had. It would have filled in the silence in the kitchen. Finally, I couldn't stand it anymore, and I looked up and their eyes showed a mix of hurt and disappointment and sadness, I guess. I hate letting people down, especially people who love me.

Papaw tried to fix Jesus with some Elmer's®, and he did a pretty good job. But the smile on Baby Jesus' face never looked quite the same. Instead of Him looking up all peaceful and content, His mouth

looked kind of crooked, like He was frowning. I guess that's what you get when you drop Jesus.

So this year, I've learned my lesson. I'm leaving Jesus alone. I'm not touching the Nativity set, which is what they call it, though I don't know why. It's really old, but it's not the oldest thing on the fireplace. The oldest thing is the Christmas candleholder. Mamaw says it's made of brass. And whatever brass is made out of, it's heavy as all get-out. I can hardly lift the thing — not that I've tried, of course. I would never touch it because I'm not supposed to, and I don't want to break anything else ever again.

Last year when Papaw held that heavy thing up and lit the candle inside it and said the words he speaks every year, his hands shook. That's how heavy it is. But come to find out, Papaw was sick last Christmas, and I had no idea. Grownups don't tell you everything. They tell you what they think you need to know or what you can handle. But I'll be honest, I don't know how to handle being

without Papaw at Christmas. It doesn't seem right to even celebrate without him. Mamaw tries to look happy, and she bakes cookies like every year, but when somebody you love isn't there even cookies don't make up for it. And when we put on one of the Christmas movies we used to watch with Papaw, she gets this far-off look on her face, and sometimes I see her wiping her eyes, but even then she tries to hide it with

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a smile. But it's a sad smile. She's not fooling me. And I smile back just as sweet as can be, like I don't know a thing about how hard it must be for her. I wonder if she knows about my smile like I know about hers? I wonder if grownups don't tell children things because they can't handle it themselves?

I was thinking about all this with my chin on my hands, staring at the frowning baby in the manger, the flicker of the fire on His face, when Mamaw knelt down beside me. Her knees, when she bends them, sound like saltines you crack into your soup. But she settled in and reached out and wiped something away from my cheek.

"Whatever is wrong, sweetheart?" she said.

I thought about saying it was nothing or maybe that I'm allergic to fireplaces or something like that. But I just looked up at her and tried to keep my chin from puckering and said, "Mamaw, who's going to light the Christmas candle?"

She hugged me for a long time, and then we sat on the couch together. We both had red eyes and needed about three boxes of tissues to stop all the tears. And even that didn't stop them. Finally, she took a deep breath.

"Do you know how the lighting of the Christmas candle started?"

I shook my head, afraid that if I talked I would start snorting again.

"It was your Papaw's grandfather, Samuel, who I first saw light it."

"What was he like?"

"He was old then, with gnarled hands and skin so thin it would bruise if you sneezed near him. But he said the candleholder belonged to his mother. And every year in December when it got the darkest, she would light it. And the tears rolled down his cheeks at the memory of her. He repeated the words he heard her say long ago."

"What words?"

"The ones your Papaw said a year ago."

I scrunched up my face, and Mamaw asked what was wrong.

"I can't remember what he said. Would you tell me?"

She hugged me again and rocked back and forth. "When he lit the candle he said, 'This light is to remind us that we have been visited by the Sonrise from on high. Jesus has come to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.'"

"I remember now," I said.

"That antique candleholder was passed down through the years and given to your Papaw. And every year he kept up the tradition to remind us, with tears in his eyes, that Christmas is about when the Light of the world broke through our darkness."

I shook my head and looked through blurry eyes at the brass holder by the Nativity. "It's not fair."

"What's not fair, sweetie?"

"It's not fair that we won't ever hear those words again."

She turned my face to hers and smiled, but this time it wasn't a sad smile. I wasn't sure what kind of smile it was, but I could tell there was something else there.

"You will hear those words this year," she said.

"But who's going to say them? And who's going to light the candle?"

"I will light the candle. And I will say the words. And all of us are going to cry. But that's OK. It will be a good cry because we're going to remember Papaw and his daddy and mama and their

parents and all those we love who are no longer with us. And the reason the tears will be good is because we'll cry with hope in our hearts. Joy and sorrow are right there in the light of that candle flame because Jesus entered our world, our darkness. He was bruised and broken for us. And death could not put the light out. Death can never extinguish the hope we have because He defeated death."

All of a sudden, something inside felt warm, and it spread all through me. And I went to the fireplace and looked close at the manger. And through the cracks Papaw had glued, I didn't see a frown, but just a trace of a smile on Baby Jesus' face.

And I realized right there that I had not broken Jesus after all. He'd let Himself be broken. And He did that for me, so I could have light in the dark times and hope in my heart. ☺

Note from Chris Fabry: This story is loosely based on the life of Samuel Hardiman Jones Sr., as shared with me by Sarah Decosimo Jones in honor of her husband, Steve.

CHRIS FABRY is an award-winning author of more than 80 books, including his latest novel, *Saving Grayson*, available now. Chris is also host of *Chris Fabry Live on Moody Radio*. Find out more at ChrisFabry.com.