

PUT  
BABY  
JESUS  
IN YOUR  
WAGON

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PUT  
BABY  
JESUS  
IN YOUR  
WAGON  
A COLLECTION OF WARM  
CHRISTMAS MEMORIES

*Written By*  
John R. Hardison

NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

## REVIEWS

*Put Baby Jesus in Your Wagon* is a great collection of Christmas stories geared toward encouraging readers to share their Christian faith! John Hardison shows us that the story of Christ's birth can be found in everyday December events. He encourages us to use our Christian faith and our God-given time and talents to serve others at Christmastime and throughout the year."

*Mark Westendorf*  
*Chairman*  
*Iron Men of God Men's Conference*

"After reading *Put Baby Jesus in Your Wagon*, parents will want to hug their children 'just because' and cherish every moment they have together. Even if you aren't a parent, this book will help you focus on the true meaning of Christmas and teach you what to pray for, especially at Christmas."

*Pastor Richard D. Starr*  
*Coordinator*  
*Men Alive! Men's Conference*

"I sang along with 'Here Comes Clara Cow'! I snuck into the barn to see the twin calves. I was sitting with the children in the 1922 children's service. I was challenged with my own spirit of giving when I read about

mayo and ketchup. Each story is related to God's Word with appropriate applications. *Put Baby Jesus in Your Wagon* is a primer on how Christians can bring that Word to every situation in life."

*Pastor Tom Klusmeyer  
Director  
Camp Phillip, Wautoma, WI*

"My first impression of *Put Baby Jesus in Your Wagon* was that it was going to be a collection of heartwarming and poignant memories of Christmases past, but it is more than that! The stories show God's hand in the lives of individuals and bring the focus back to the real reason we celebrate. *Put Baby Jesus in Your Wagon* helped me reflect on the Christmases of my past and the loving way God guided and focused me through those times."

*Russ Wagner  
Men of His Word Ministries*

"It's refreshing to read a book that shares the true meaning of Christmas, which doesn't include magical snowmen, flying reindeer, or men in red suits. This book is a keeper and a wonderful addition to your personal, school, or church library."

*Neil Hankwitz  
Faith in Action Volunteer Management  
Kingdom Workers*

## DEDICATION

This collection of stories about the celebration of the birth of Jesus is dedicated to the memories of Leo Waldbauer, Don Butler, and Lois McLean, longtime members of Redeemer Lutheran Church in Yakima, Washington. They each loved Christmas, their church, and their Savior. All three of them set a Christian example for all of us who knew them, by demonstrating the full meaning of following in Christ's footsteps at Christmas and throughout the years. I thank God for putting them in my life. I count it a real privilege to have had each of them as a friend.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John R. Hardison was born on September 22, 1942. Raised on his folks' citrus, avocado, and cattle ranch located five miles outside the town of Fillmore, California, he worked on his dad and grandparents' ranches doing all kinds of odd jobs. John also found time for horseback riding, hunting, swimming, and hiking. He loved to roam over the acres and acres of ground included in those ranches and the Los Padres National Forest that adjoined his father's ranch.

John attended Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington, from 1960–1964, earning his BA degree. John and his wife moved to Yakima in the fall of 1964 and he became a junior high and high school teacher for the next thirty years, retiring in 1994. His wife also began teaching soon after the birth of their son, Gregory, in the fall of 1964.

He has had to deal with his share of losses in his life. His only son, Gregory, died in an accident in 1977 at age 13. His father died at age 56 of cancer, as did a very close friend from his college years at age 28. More recently his hunting partner of thirty years passed away. John was divorced, but has been happily married to Ruth Friebus Hardison since June 14, 1975.

Ruth and John have spent a lot of time traveling in the western part of the United States and Canada,

doing volunteer church work for Redeemer Lutheran Church in Yakima, writing books, horseback riding, hiking, skiing, and hunting. They currently reside in their home on a small ranch ten miles west of Yakima, Washington, where they have horses, dogs, and several cats.

John has written two other books, *Under God's Sky* and *A View From the Mountains*, which are both collections of devotional stories taken from real life events the author or his close friends or relatives have actually lived. You can find out more about his two books and where to get them by visiting [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net).

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\*Reprinted from my previous books

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**Don Fluaitt**— He volunteered his time to take many of the photographs in this book. I think he did a fantastic job. I am in his debt for all his fine work.

**Don Butler**— He was an expert on Martin Luther and could tell you just about anything you might want to know about him. Don read my stories and made many suggestions and corrections. His input was extremely helpful. He went to be with the Lord he loved on October 6, 2013. I miss him as a friend and every time I write another story.

**Pastor Tim Schwartz**— He read most of the articles included in this book. He made many good suggestions and tried his best to help me use just the right words in the right places. I thank him.

**Gail and Dona Thornton**— Gail is the rancher in many of my stories and a close friend. He has come a long way from when I first saw him sitting as a student in my very first seventh grade class to being a very

successful cattle rancher in the Yakima Valley. He was only nine years younger than I in that classroom. Gail and his wife, Dona, continue to encourage me. They often have suggestions and corrections that really improve my work. I appreciate their friendship and their help. Over the years Gail has allowed me to use several events that happened on his ranch and in his life as material for my stories, one of which is included in this book. In addition, he is a very good writer himself. I thank both of them for all they have done.

**Members of Redeemer Lutheran Church**— They have always been very positive about my work. Many have encouraged me to continue writing articles for the church newsletter, which I have been doing for the last couple of decades. They let me know how much they liked the Christmas stories I wrote and led me to think about writing this book with just Christmas stories included.

**The staff at Northwestern Publishing House**— They worked with me to edit my work, fix problems, correct punctuation, do the layouts, put these stories between two covers, and make this book become a reality. I thank them.

## INTRODUCTION

There is a “Christian difference” that makes this book stand out from others written about Christmas. Many books have wonderful stories and pictures telling of the beauty of the Christmas season, family traditions, decorating the Christmas tree, etc. The stories are fuzzy, warm, and meant to make the reader feel good. There is nothing wrong with feeling good or reading these books, but my book is different. It is dedicated to the idea that Christmas should center on Christ. Every story in this collection is about things that have happened to me or people I know. The stories help the reader better understand the implications that the birth of Jesus has for each of us — how he was destined to fulfill the prophecies of the Old Testament and become the Savior of the world.

As a child, I could hardly wait for Christmas. Our family did not have a huge income, but there were always plenty of gifts around the tree, lots of good food, wonderful church services, and Christian love. This book contains many of my favorite Christmas stories from years ago and more. What could be better than authoring a book that helps others love and understand the story of Jesus’ birth and see how important it is in their lives? By dying on a Roman cross as an adult, Jesus ultimately paid the price for all the sins each of us has committed or will commit in

the future. The wages of sin is death. Jesus paid that price, not for his sins but for ours. He defeated the grave, making it possible for those who believe in him to have eternal life in heaven. I pray these stories help remind the reader that Jesus is as real and alive today as he was when he was born in Bethlehem some two thousand years ago.

I can remember heading home from the snow-covered Cascade Mountains, driving my GMC pickup and camper while pulling a loaded two-horse trailer. The cab was piled high with my hunting gear and rifle. I was tired and half-frozen from going on the last November elk hunt of the year earlier that morning. I did what I often do when I need a pick-me-up. I put on Christmas music—beautiful hymns and carols—and turned up the volume. It never gets better than that! I loved every minute of those rides home. I could hardly wait to put up the tree, decorate the house, and start celebrating the birth of the Christ Child. My wife, Ruth, has always insisted we have to get Thanksgiving finished before we start Christmas, but she has her hands full holding me back.

I pray when you read this collection of my favorite Christmas stories, they will renew your excitement and love toward our Savior Jesus—as they do my own every time I read them. God in human form arrived on this earth, not as a sword-wielding rebel but as a tiny baby lying in a manger. He was destined

to become the Savior of the whole world. What a story! What a life! What a difference he has made and continues to make in the world today. It is my prayer that these stories will make a real Christian difference for those who take time to read them.

I wish you a blessed Christmas,  
John R. Hardison



## ONE



### PUT BABY JESUS IN YOUR WAGON

The book of *Guinness World Records* says the world's largest collection of nativity sets is in a museum in Feltre, Italy, and contains (as of March 14, 2009) 1,802 different nativities. Surely Mary and Joseph could not have imagined that the humble scene with themselves, baby Jesus in a manger, some livestock, angels, and several shepherds on Christmas Eve night two thousand years ago would be re-created with thousands and thousands of figurines fashioned by craftspeople and factories throughout the world. Because we are told only a few details of that night, almost every nativity set is slightly different. It boggles my mind to think of how many unique nativity sets there are in the world.

Over the years, my wife, Ruth, and I have acquired a variety of nativity sets. We are nowhere near the world record. And many of our sets are, perhaps, too beat up for a museum.

Of course, we have the set that was made by my grandfather and grandmother, which is my favorite.

It consists of the wooden stable, two camels, a couple of sheep, a cow, a donkey, a couple of shepherds, an angel, the three Magi, Mary, Joseph, and the babe in the manger. It fits beautifully on the waist-high top of the cupboard where our good dishes are kept in our dining room. It is my pride and joy as far as Christmas decorations are concerned.

To my wife and me, it is not the price that makes a nativity set valuable but whether it is beautiful, unusual, or interesting. I bought one small set at a yard sale for only a few cents, and it sits on our refrigerator all year round. It is from Alaska. The barn is made like a log cabin, and it has just Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus. We like it because it is rather rustic.

We bought one small set while on a trip in Lake City, Colorado. It was made in Israel from olive wood. There were a number of these sets on the store shelf, but each one was slightly different. Ours has circular rings on the piece of olive wood that give the illusion of a cave behind Mary, Joseph, and the baby, which is what some say the actual birthplace may have been.

We have an all-white set made out of a chalklike material. The individual figures of sheep, angels, the child in the manger, and more, are rather small and delicate. Several have been broken and patched. However, this set was given to Ruth by a favorite aunt, so we consider it a keepsake.

We have a very nice-looking set with Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus that is supposed to look like it was carved from a single piece of log, though it is actually plastic.

Another set has only Mary, Joseph, and Jesus left because the other pieces were broken when the box was dropped. We love its look and the main pieces are still there, so we continue to use it anyway.

A cross in our dining room pictures various Bible Christmas scenes, making it a very unusual way of showing the nativity.

Ruth even bought a set that is missing Joseph and has only Mary and the Christ Child. People still comment on how beautiful that set is. They never seem to miss the other figures.

My sister rescued the old crèche that came from the five-and-dime store when we were kids. The donkey no longer has a head. The cow is missing an ear. The other figures have been worn with scratches and are a little dirty from the sticky hands of the little ones who have held them through the years. The stable is also a little worse for wear. However, the Christ Child is still laid lovingly in the manger each Christmas as my sister puts the set out with her other crèche scenes that are much newer.

It doesn't matter how expensive the nativity set is or how many figures it has, they all have one thing

in common. Even all those 1,802 sets in the record-setting Italian museum collection have this one thing too. They all include the baby Jesus. Take him out of any of these sets and what good is it? With an empty manger, the meaning of Christmas is completely lost. The shepherds and angels as well as Mary and Joseph have no reason to be at that stable if the baby Jesus is not there. He alone is what is important.

I once read a story about a woman who saw a poor little girl looking at an inexpensive nativity set. The child's mother wanted to buy the nativity set but could not afford it. The little girl begged to be allowed to have just the baby Jesus to take home. Out of frustration, the mother became angry with the child and made her put the statue of baby Jesus back on the shelf. A woman who had watched all this let the person at the register know that she would buy the nativity set so that the little girl could take home the statue of baby Jesus, which she was still admiring. The woman took the statue to the register and convinced the mother it would be okay for the child to have it. Each Christmas after that she kept the rest of the nativity set sitting on her desk at work. She told others who asked why there was no statue of the baby that it reminded her of the importance of Jesus in her life and that she felt it was the most important nativity set she owned. I firmly believe she was right.

When Isaiah said, “He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6) and Luke said, “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:11), they were not talking about Mary or Joseph or an angel or any of the other figures in the nativity scenes. They were speaking of Jesus alone.

Maybe you have seen the Christmas episode of the TV show *Dragnet* from many years ago where Sgt. Joe Friday and his partner were called to find a statue of baby Jesus that had been stolen from the nativity scene at a church in a poor neighborhood. Like all the stories on *Dragnet*, this one came from actual police files. Jack Webb, the star and producer of the show, liked this true story so much that in the early 1950s he did an episode on it on both TV and radio in the same week, and then in 1967 he produced another TV version of it, with many of the same actors and almost the same script. I first heard this program on the radio. Later, I saw it on television as well, and I loved it. It was repeated on TV for several years and is now available on DVD, no doubt because people besides myself loved it as well.

When Sergeant Friday and his partner, Frank, get to the church, he describes the nativity set as having one shepherd minus an arm, one sheep with many cracks in it, and, of course, the infant Jesus missing.

That description fits some of our nativity sets, except this one was missing the key piece.

As Sergeant Friday is getting “just the facts,” he has an interesting bit of dialogue with the priest. He asks when the church is locked for the night. The priest replies that it stays open all night. Friday is surprised, partly because this is a low-income area of Los Angeles.

“You leave it wide open so any thief can walk in?”

“Particularly thieves, Sergeant,” says the priest with a little grin.

I always loved that line. Christmas Eve is especially for thieves and all lost sinners, isn't it? Those are exactly the ones our Savior came to save.

Friday and his partner track down their only suspect. He has a criminal record and was seen leaving the church with a bundle in his arms the size of the Jesus figurine. But the bundle turns out to be just a pair of trousers that someone had mended for him. The two officers reluctantly return to the church to tell the priest they are out of leads and won't be able to find baby Jesus before Christmas Mass.

As the two officers are talking with the priest, the church doors open. Up the long church aisle walks pint-sized Paco Mendoza, pulling his red wagon noisily across the stone floor. When he finally gets close

enough, the priest and the two officers see that the Jesus figurine is in his wagon.

Sergeant Friday has the priest ask Paco some questions in Spanish. Finally, the priest explains what happened. Through the years, Paco had been praying for a red wagon. This year, he prayed to the child Jesus and made a promise that if he got the wagon, the child Jesus would have the first ride in it.

By now Paco is in tears. He thinks he is in big trouble. He asks the priest if the devil is going to come and take him down into hell to punish him. So the priest says to little Paco, “No el Diablo. Jesus ama a Paquito mucho.” Jesus loves Paquito (little Paco) a lot.

As Paco is leaving with his empty red wagon, the priest tells Sergeant Friday that Paco’s family could not afford to get him a wagon. But each year the firefighters refurbish used toys and give them to poor children in the neighborhood. They gave Paco the wagon he had prayed for, so Paco kept his promise to Jesus. It was not enough for Paco to look at Jesus in the nativity set in front of church. He loved Jesus so much that he kept his promise to him to have the first ride in his new wagon. When the ride was done, what did Jesus do? Through the priest, Paco was told that Jesus loves him very much.

Jack Webb opted to put this show on radio and TV several times. I can understand why. People loved this

beautiful story and looked forward to seeing it year after year.

This year when you see a nativity scene in front of a church or at someone's home, or when you bring your favorite set (or sets) out to decorate your home, remember which of the figurines gives every nativity set its meaning. Remember that Jesus is not just a nice baby from long ago. He grew up to fulfill the prophecies about the Suffering Servant. He died to pay the price for our sins, but rose from the grave so that Christians will have eternal life. He sits at his Father's right hand, hearing your every heartbeat and knowing your every thought. As in the story of Paco, his door is wide open all night long "so any thief can walk in" — or any other sinners. Like Paco, talk to him. God answered Paco's prayers with a red wagon from the local firefighters. Tell Jesus your prayers. Particularly, tell him the prayers that have gone unanswered for years. He is preparing his answer as you read this. We do not know how he will answer, but you can be sure he *will* answer because God's Word says so.

Finally, don't leave Jesus there in the nativity set. Put him in your "wagon." Make him a part of your everyday life. Ruth and I discovered a long time ago that life is better with Christ at the center. We look forward to reading our devotions just before bed each night and discussing them. Try it. It is fun and comforting. It isn't just nativity sets that are meaningless

without Jesus. Every part of our lives is affected either by Jesus or by his absence. There is no middle ground. However, those who keep Jesus at their side can expect to hear his ministers say, just as Paco was told in the *Dragnet* story, “No devil for you. Jesus loves you very much!” The Bible tells us that same message again and again.

Put baby Jesus in your wagon (your life) this year and every year for the long haul, instead of the short haul by putting his statue and the nativity set back in the storage cabinet till next Christmas. ❧

*Ab, dearest Jesus, holy Child,  
Prepare a bed, soft, undefiled  
Within my heart, made clean and new,  
A quiet chamber kept for you.*

FROM A HYMN BY MARTIN LUTHER