

## Why the manger?

Luke 2:1-14

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December 22, 2013

### The Birth of Jesus Christ

2 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 And all went to be registered, each to his own town. 4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. 6 And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths ~~and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.~~

8 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. 10 And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths ~~and lying in a manger.~~" 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

15 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby ~~lying in a manger.~~

What is missing from this account? One little piece of information that has profoundly impacted the Christmas story. It adds tension and appreciation. It spurs the imagination and directs understanding. It sits central to any nativity scene. It was so common that under other circumstances, it would hardly be noticed. At first glance, it does not even seem necessary for the story to move forward. Yet it is an intimate point of connection for many to the Child of Christmas. What's missing is the manger.

Luke 2:7, 12, 16

7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.

What is a manger? Most English Bible versions translate the word in question as manger referring to an animal feeding trough. So it was basically the animal's plate or dish.

With that in mind, we might have to revamp our view of the manger a little. The slobber and half chewed food of animals would penetrate the wood or stone or at least leave their stains. It was likely scraped and scarred from the tools used to make it. It was never designed to be a cradle. They could get full of mud, manure, dust and cobwebs and smell of must and mold. In the summer there are flies and spiders and insects around mangers. There's no such thing as a clean or hygienic manger.

What would we think of a parent who placed a new born baby in a bowl used to feed a dog? There's something wrong. This is unusual. They must be sick in the head or desperate. In fact, this was unusual even in that day because Luke feels he has to explain it. Why did she lay him in a manger? Because there was no room at the inn. But if there was room at the inn, he would likely not have been laid down in the manger.

### **Why did Luke include the manger in his Christmas account?**

Well it doesn't seem critical to the story moving forward. Jesus had to go to the cross. It's not obvious he had to be laid in a manger. Nor did Luke include it because there was some prophecy to fulfill. Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem like we saw last week. But nothing in the Old Testament pointed to the promised one being born in a manger.

So what might be some reasons for Luke including this detail in the Jesus' birth story?

Well, **the manger distinguished baby Jesus from all other babies born in Bethlehem.** The shepherds did not have a digital image of Jesus they could compare to a local newborn. They'd never met Joseph and Mary. Bethlehem was crowded with travelers because of the census. Many babies were likely around. But very few if any would be laid in a manger.

The angels use the manger to describe how the shepherds will find the promised one. "You will find him wrapped in swaddling clothes and laying in a manger." And when the shepherds found Jesus, Luke confirms that this was a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. So Luke uses the manger to confirm Jesus' identity.

But the manger seems to communicate much more. **It emphasizes humility.** When humans announce a royal birth, they trumpet it to the world and ensure most everyone knows about it. But when we look at the people in this passage, notice the downward trend of their status. First, you have Caesar Augustus, king over the entire Roman Empire. He was the top of the heap in the civilized world; the king of earthly kings. Then we go down a level to

Quirinius, governor over Syria. Then we come to Joseph who was way below Quirinius but at least he was still a man with higher status than any woman or child. Then comes Mary who in that culture was considered lower than her husband in importance. Finally, we come to a child who was lower than a woman. But this was not only a child but a baby in a manger. Talk about a nobody compared to Caesar Augustus. But the baby would turn out to be the Somebody everyone including Augustus needed if they were to be reconciled with God. The manger points to Jesus' humble beginnings.

**The manger communicates poverty and hardship.** Joseph and Mary had no fold up state of the art play pen with accessories and attachments. Nor did they have means to secure more appropriate accommodation. Luke will later reveal that they offered the sacrifice allotted for the poorest when they presented baby Jesus at the temple. Jesus was born into a life of poverty and hardship. Yet though this life would be physically difficult, it could be spiritually beneficial.

Some of you here may be closer to poverty than you've ever been this Christmas. There are unique challenges that come with this. I remember when I was out of work and on unemployment for about 6 months. You cut out so many things you take for granted when you have to watch ever quarter. Yet, for me there was much greater awareness of the Lord's provision. Physical poverty can provide spiritual opportunity.

Though some of us may not be physically poor, we are all spiritually poor. We all need of God. We are unable to get to Him on our own efforts or by paying a fee. Yet this does not need to be a tragedy but an opportunity. Recognition of spiritual poverty is the first step towards Jesus. He had something to something about the spiritually poor.

- *Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
- *Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*
- *Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.*
- *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*
- *Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.*
- *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*
- *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*

- *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

You don't need any money to experience those kinds of blessings. We need to start by recognizing our own spiritual poverty and then turn to God who promises to supply all our needs. But this does not mean comfort, peace and prosperity. Jesus talks about blessing in the midst of poverty, difficulties and hardship. When we go through hardship, Jesus knows very well that life.

Mary had to place her newborn baby in an animal feeding trough despite the fact that she had been told he would be great and Son of the Most High. Yet at that moment – how unsanitary; how poor; how dangerous; how vulnerable they were. Yet that is exactly where God wanted him to be – at that point of peril.

What about you and your family? Are you willing to go wherever God calls you? Maybe our ultimate dream is for our family to experience freedom, peace and prosperity. Who wouldn't that for their children? Who wouldn't want that for their family? But the Christian calling involves great cost. If God allowed the king of kings to experience poverty and hardship, why would we expect affluence and comfort?

Parents, what if God wants your son or daughter to go on a mission and they die there? Yet through that death, hundreds come to Christ. Would you be willing to let them go? Or is your ultimate dream for them to be safe, secure, prosperous and comfortable?

Young people, what if God wants you to go from all the potential and opportunities of this area and region to some obscure little place where few people will ever hear of you? Would you be willing to go?

Grandparents, what if God wants your grandkids to step out in faith and do something not expected with their lives? Will you encourage that and will you encourage their parents in that? Or do you just want your family to be safe, prosperous and at peace. That's not the life Jesus' lived.

God works to prepare us for the great interruptions of life. But will we follow His purposes or fight against them and go our own way?

We must take an eternal view of life if we don't want to waste our lives. Besides, what we deem to be so safe is not guaranteed. Wasn't it just one year ago when some young teachers entered a Newton school expecting a normal day's work. A few hours later the principal and counselor were shot dead in the hall and one young teacher gave her life trying to shield the bodies of her young students from a shooter. Life is not always safe, secure and comfortable. The

manger points us to an incredible risk and demonstration of love on God's part and a call to risk and faith on our part.

We must respond by confessing our spiritual poverty to Him and then turn to Him in dependence to fill us up.

The manger identified baby Jesus. It communicates poverty and hardship.

**The manger also communicates anonymity.** Sure, everyone in heaven knew about it. But hardly anyone on earth paid attention. How different from William & Kate's baby George. The world's media assembled outside the hospital. There were regular progress reports and breathless anticipation of Buckingham palace's announcement. Then everyone waited for the first glimpse of the baby. But Jesus was born away from the palaces of Rome and Jerusalem. Very few people knew about his arrival.

Maybe this points to our need to accept that life is not all about us and making a name for ourselves. It's actually about God. It's about what He's doing and calling us to join Him in. There are temptations to want to be part of something big and well known and cool. If those are our primary concerns, following a baby laid in manger might not measure up. But if we accept the obscurity of the manger, we might more readily accept where God has for us to be.

**The manger also communicates rejection.** If there was a widespread appetite for a savior, more than a few despised shepherds would have shown up at the manger. But the current king of the Jews, Herod felt threatened by this baby and wanted him dead. The intelligentsia of the religious community correctly identified the birthplace but did not bother to go see him. The citizens of Bethlehem barely noticed that another baby was born.

Jesus would experience such rejection throughout his life and ultimately on the cross. *He was despised and rejected by men: a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised and we esteemed him not.* So if Christ experienced rejection, we need to expect the rejection we will experience as Christ followers. Sometimes, people will not like your Christian faith. Sometimes people will reject you because you accept Christ.

Not that this means we can go out and act like jerks so people will reject us and think we're just doing what Jesus did. No. We live winsome lives – lives that overflow with the sweet aroma of Christ. Some will be attracted to it and wonder. To others the smell will be repulsive and they will reject the Christ and show it by rejecting us.

But oh, how tempting it is to crave acceptance, affirmation and popularity. I like being liked. I like acceptance and affirmation. Sometimes, I may have spoken or led in a way that fosters more acceptance of me rather than the

straight goods of Christ. But that is no longer good enough for me. It's no longer acceptable for me to people come to Christ and get baptized and then just sit there and stagnate with their Christianity. It is not okay with me if you are a complacent Christian. We are not called to make one decision to receive Christ at some point in our past, live however we like for the most of our lives and then turn to Christ for help on our death bed. Jesus was not born in a manger and then whisked away to a palace where he could receive the best treatment and training for 30 years until he had to die. He lived daily the life of following His father through poverty, obscurity and rejection from the world. We are not called to a single decision but to a lifetime of discipleship which includes poverty, obscurity and rejection. Yet when we actually live this life in Christ, we discover real life.

I was struck by how God has grown some of this real life in me, as I walked through St. Albert Center recently. I've started doing something I swore I would never do – Mall walking. My Mom and Dad used to do that. They would get together with their senior friends and walk around the malls on a specific path for exercise when the weather was cold. Well because of my back and slipping and falling and the cold weather, I still have to walk for a good 30 minutes somewhere. So I sometimes walk St. Albert Center but try to look cool doing it.

Well on one of these walks I was struck with how God has changed and transformed my heart over these past 35 years. I remember 30+ years ago that at Christmas one of my favorite activities was going to the mall. But it was not to mall walk and get exercise with the old people. I just loved looking at all that one could accumulate – all that could be purchased – all that could be given. But after 30 years of sales pitches; best sale in our history; guarantees for life; sifting through the no longer necessary possessions of deceased parents and the tiresome decisions necessary to make space for stuff – I'm done with all that. I just walk for exercise – for life with freedom from the tyranny of more. That's just one little thing God has done in my life through walking with Him imperfectly day by day. My hope for all of you is that you will experience this alternate, wonderful, fulfilling, releasing life with Jesus that includes poverty, anonymity and rejection. I pray that you will experience this more and more as you walk with Him.

So if the manger points TO the identity, poverty, hardship, anonymity and rejection of Jesus, it points us AWAY from the pursuit of riches, comfort, recognition and popularity. Are you headed towards the manger or away from it? Do you accept the one who laid there and His high calling upon your life OR do you turn away from Him convinced your

way is better? In these last days of Christmas, will you come again or anew or the first time to give your whole life to the Christ who laid in a manger, was raised up on cross, laid in a tomb and rose up to reign forever?