

In a Manger

Luke 2:1-20 (New American Standard Bible)

² Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. ³ This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ⁴ And all the people were on their way to register for the census, each to his own city. ⁵ Now Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, ⁶ in order to register along with Mary, who was betrothed to him, and was pregnant. ⁷ While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁸ And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

⁹ In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock at night. ¹⁰ And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood near them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. ¹¹ And so the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; ¹² for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹³ And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." ¹⁴ And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly army of angels praising God and saying,

¹⁵ "Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace among people with whom He is pleased."

¹⁶ When the angels had departed from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, "Let's go straight to Bethlehem, then, and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁷ And they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. ¹⁸ When they had seen Him, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. ¹⁹ And all who heard it were amazed about the things which were told them by the shepherds. ²⁰ But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²¹ And the shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

Introduction

Some years ago, around this time, a certain township in West Virginia set up the nativity scene in the town's annual Festival of Lights. Of course, as you imagined, the parks superintendent left out Jesus because of concerns about the separation of church and state. When the news spread about the omission, it prompted protesting emails from all over as far as South Korea. One blog said, "What's the matter? Scared of a little baby?" So, succumbing to the pressure, the mayor decided to put baby Jesus back in the manger, but still without Joseph or Mary (http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/M/MISSING_JESUS?SITE=NCAGW&SECTION=).

This morning, we are going to think about the significance and the lesson of the manger where our Savior was laid.

Content

In the past, some curious minds have been looking into historical and archeological facts concerning baby Jesus and the manger. First, they discovered that the place they believe where Jesus was born was not a western style stable where horses and oxen would stay on the ground. Rather, it would've been highly likely a stone cave—dug into the ground about 10-foot deep that provided a steady temperature of 69 degrees Fahrenheit inside. Scholars claim that it served well as a place for giving birth.

As far as the manger is concerned, I checked out its definition online: It says, “A manger is a trough or box of carved stone or wood construction used to hold food for animals. Mangers are mostly used in livestock raising” (Wikipedia).

Biblical scholars believe that the manger Jesus was laid down would've been a long-hewn stone feeding station, rather than a wooden one. If you love the image of wooden manger filled with hay, I am sorry to disappoint you, but the point is not what material the manger was made of, but what the manger meant in those days and today. A manger was the feeding trough for *animals*.

By the way, I also checked out how many times the word ‘manger’ appears in the Scriptures (using NASB). Five times altogether. Two times in the Old Testament and three times in the New Testament. In the New Testament, all references appear in Luke (Luke 2: 7, 12, 16). The other two places in the Old Testament, they too, refer to the animal’s feeding trough: E.g. *Where there are no oxen, the manger is empty* (Proverbs 14:4). *An ox knows its owner, And a donkey its master’s manger* (Isaiah 1:3).

In today’s text, verse 12, the angel told the shepherds to look for a ‘sign’ in Bethlehem (v. 12): a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths **and** lying in a manger. Not just any baby in swaddling cloths, but the baby had to be in a manger. After some search, when the shepherds finally saw the baby lying in a manger, they knew He was the newborn Savior. The same manger still has a message for us today—the lowly birth of the Savior. It helps us understand how humble our Savior is.

One theologian puts, “*the very humble circumstances of this Savior’s birth are his choicest credentials*” (Frederick W. Danker, *Jesus and the NEW AGE*, p. 58). That ‘choicest credential’ is humility. Did you know humility is a mark of our Savior, from birth to death? Consider this. At His birth, Christ identified Himself with *shepherds* (peasants in Israel) and with *animals*. During His ministry, He identified Himself with *sinner*s. The Pharisees and their scribes would accuse Him saying, “*Why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?*” (Luke 5:30). He even identified Himself with *criminals* at His death (Luke 23:32). He was a humble Savior.

Imagine God's Son laid in a manger. The Son of the LORD Most High lying, not in a golden crib, but in an animal feeding trough! I am afraid that the trough was not germ-free nor a brand new one. I am sure the stone trough had been used for years. By animals. Every single day. I wonder how often it got cleaned.

Put yourself in Mary's shoes for a minute, will you? Mary would've never guessed the moment when the baby would arrive. I don't think she planned ahead as exactly as it is written in the Bible, thinking that *"I am going to give birth in a stone cave and when the baby is born, I am going to wrap him in swaddling cloths and lay him in a manger so that the shepherds would tell right away that the baby is the Savior. By doing all of this, I am going to make the history of our Savior."* No. Nothing like that. The family, Joseph and His wife Mary, had to deal with the situations as they arose.

Did you know that, for Mary and Joseph, it wasn't even an option not to travel when the due date for baby was so close? No, it was rather 'obey the emperor's decree or else' situation--like it or not, they had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem about 90 miles on foot to register in Joseph's hometown. Imagine the soon-mother-to-be possibly walked that much distance. Hmm... wait a minute. Didn't she ride on a donkey back, right? Not sure. *"The scriptures don't actually say that she did. She could have. It is likely that she did given it was the popular mode of transportation for people of her day and circumstances. But we really don't know"* (<http://thegiftofgivinglife.com/did-mary-really-ride-a-donkey-to-bethlehem/>). That's why I said, she might have walked.

Anyway, under normal condition (that is, not too many winding roads or rough spots such as bandits), average person can traverse about 20 miles a day. So, you figure it out. Four to five days of travel, at least. Perhaps, a week. Furthermore, due to the window of time for census, the town must have been crowded with visitors from all over. Everyone, I am sure, was trying to register themselves as soon as possible with the Roman government and go home. Obviously, there was no room in the inn for Joseph and Mary (Luke 2:7). So, they ended up staying in a stone cave. There Mary gave birth to her son, wrapped him in cloths, and laid him in a manger. Once again, under normal circumstance, no parents would put their newborn baby in a manger, which was smelly, and not clean. But, at least, it was better than laying Him on the ground. So, baby Jesus was laid in the manger.

Remember? Manger means feeding station for animals, not for people. That's where God's own Son started His first day of life on earth. How about that?! I hope you see what I see here. The Son of God was born humble, lived humble, and died humble. Philippians 2:5-8 sums up well such life of Savior: ⁵ *Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus,* ⁶ *who, as He already existed in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,* ⁷ *but **emptied Himself** by taking the form of a bond-servant and being born in the likeness of men.* ⁸ *And being found in appearance as a man, **He humbled Himself** by becoming obedient to the point of death: death on a cross.*

All of us would struggle to remain humble from birth to death because of our own pride and ego. However, Jesus was different. Of course, He had to be different from us, right? Like the difference between heaven and earth. Being so high and exalted above everyone else, equal to God Himself, yet Jesus lowered and humbled Himself being born in the likeness of men lying in a manger. He was truly humble from birth to death and anytime in between. He called Himself, “I am gentle and **humble** in heart” (Matthew 11:29). How about Him riding on a donkey back when He entered Jerusalem as triumphant king (Matthew 21:6)? How about Him washing His disciples’ feet showing them the example of serving one another (John 13:5)?

Conclusion

As much as we cannot take out baby Jesus from the nativity set, neither can we separate baby Jesus from the manger. The manger means Christ’s lowly and humble birth. In today’s text, Luke the Gospel writer never used the word ‘humble’ or ‘humility,’ however, he conveys the strongest message of the Savior’s birth: humility. This Christmas God calls us to be like Christ. Be like Him. Have Christ’s attitude. Be humble.

Amen.