

"The Manger"

Luke 2:1-20 First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

12/24/04 **CHRISTMAS EVE**

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A STORY ABOUT TAXES

One commentator described the ancient world into which Jesus was born in this way,

"Your nation is occupied by a foreign power. Their cruel soldiers couldn't care less about you and your family. Their cold stares frighten you.

Every time you see them march past with their weapons and armor, you want to hide. Years of war have destroyed so many farms that used to yield rich harvests of wheat and barley but are now only bowls of dust.

And still you are forced to pay taxes to these pagan foreigners. Yes, not only do they have their heels on your neck, but they also laugh at your God while they do it. They have abused all your friends and family, and things seem even worse for some. The poor, the widows, the orphans, the sick and the lonely don't have a chance."

That's how the Christmas story begins, with a young couple making a trip to Bethlehem in order to pay taxes to an occupying foreign power. But, as if that wasn't bad enough, they cannot find a place to stay, and their firstborn son, Jesus is born in a manger.

BORN IN A MANGER

Jesus was born in a manger, a feeding trough for the animals. What a strange place for God's Son to be born.

Many of us don't really know just how strange this story sounds because we have grown up with the sanitized stables and sentimental songs that have characterized the Christmas pageants of our past. Yes, he was born in a manger. We hear it every year.

And most of the time, as we did this year, we just try to keep our celebrations simple. We sing the hymns; have the children parade down

the isle at the appointed time and then everyone breaths a deep sigh of relief.

It's over, at least until next year.

But, even our nostalgic celebrations of the blessed event can sometimes present a hint of the radical nature of the story.

This past Sunday one member told me about the year they decided to add a live goat to the pageant in our church.

It stole the show, eating the swaddling clothes off the baby Jesus, the paper background and then, as an encore, it fell off the stage. Now that was a Christmas play to remember.

The goat did not return next year.

But, when the Scripture tells us that Jesus was born in a manger, it reminds us that the birth of Jesus really was a story about unruly goats and unpleasant smells. Sometimes I think that we don't realize how degrading it was for Jesus to be born in this way.

THE SQUALID MANGER

Going on the basis of contemporary Arab practice, one scholar has suggested that the manger may have actually been located in a house that was divided into two levels. The upper level would have contained living space for the people while the lower level would have provided a place for the animals to stay.

Geoffrey Bull gives us an idea of what kind of place this sort of stable may have been. He wrote,

"After a meal and when it was already dark, it was necessary for me to go downstairs to give more hay to the horses. I clambered down the notched tree trunk to the lower floor, which was given over in the usual manner to stabling.

Below it was absolutely pitch black. My boots squelched in the manure, and the fetid smell of the animals was nauseating. I felt my way among the mules and horses, expecting to be kicked at any moment.

What a place, I thought.

Then, as I continued to grope my way in the darkness toward the hay, it suddenly flashed through my mind. 'What's today?' In traveling, the days had become a little muddled in my mind. Then it came to me,

'It's Christmas Eve.' I stood still, suddenly still. To think that my Savior was born in a place like this."

People have always tried to beautify the manger and the cross. It's as if we try to hide the fact that at birth we resigned Him to the stench of beasts, and at death we exposed Him to the shame of rogues.

But, that's the story. It's a story of salvation in the most unlikely of places.

THE UNHOLY LAND

A recent visitor to the Holy Land noted that it didn't seem all that holy to him. His visit began with three hours in customs being viewed rather suspiciously by Israeli agents. And then, after a long winding, honking bus ride up to Jerusalem he made it into the Holy City itself.

He was disappointed. With the guards, the crowds and the traffic, well, it just didn't seem like that holy a place.

But, if he was disappointed by Jerusalem, he was really disappointed by his trip to Nazareth, Jesus' hometown.

The Bible dictionary refers to Nazareth as an "insignificant agricultural village." It is never mentioned in the Old Testament, and the only mention in the New Testament is a remark of contempt.

When Nathaniel heard that Jesus was from this place he sneered, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Not according to my friend who made the trip that year. He said,

"Today one sees Nazareth from the highway, first as a dry clump of concrete houses, abandoned cars and olive groves. Next it is seen as a morass of clogged streets with cars, dust, tourist buses and honking trucks."

Tourists are herded up the hill to poor Nazareth, to view the Church of the Annunciation. Because of the congestion, the tourist buses must wait at the bottom of the hill.

On foot the pilgrim pushes past junk shops and the ever-present vendors hawking their wares. It was a hard walk up the hill to Nazareth, to that place where it's said that Mary and Joseph's house once stood.

But, today there is no sign or even a replica of that house. No, in the sixties the pope gave funds for the building of a large concrete church. According to my friend,

"From the outside, it's a parking lot trying to be a church, and from the inside, it's a church trying to be a bunker."

He said that the poured concrete ceilings reminded him of standing under a highway bridge.

The sight of this massive, concrete building supposedly built over Mary and Joseph's old house would have been comical had it not been so depressing. No one said it, but he knew it was true. Everyone in his group was disappointed.

"Have I come all this way, expecting to be inspired and this is what I get for my effort?"

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" He was starting to understand why Nathaniel had so much contempt for this place.

The guide then herded the visitors up to the altar, pushing through the throngs of tourist. A couple from Des Moines was trying to get it all on video for some strange reason. Mercifully, they finally turned to leave, climbing the steps that led back to the street and the blessings of Coca-Cola.

THE WORD BECAME FLESH

But that's when it happened. He said,

"Trudging up those stairs, tourist behind tourist, my eyes fell upon a quote chiseled in the wall. It was in Latin, but the words were so familiar that anyone could read it,

'And the word became flesh and dwelt among us.'"

At that moment he understood.

There was no holy land, no "little town of Bethlehem how still we see thee lie."

There was only Nazareth and towns like it all over the world, small workaday tourist towns like, I don't know, Kissimmee or maybe even St. Cloud?

Surely God wouldn't send his Son to a place like this? Or maybe he would. He was born in a manger. The word became flesh and dwells among us.

Even now he dwells among us. Even now amid the gaudy lights, crowds of tourists and discourteous drivers He is with us.

He was born in a manger, a feeding trough for animals, and in the stench of a stable, a fearful world was given hope.

FINDING THE MANGER TODAY

Perhaps, like the shepherds, we too should go and find this wondrous sight proclaimed by the angels. But, where is Jesus today? Where is the manger?

It may be closer than you think.

Martha was heartbroken. Due to the unexpected blizzard, the airports were closed.

Her daughter in Cincinnati, the one for whom she had baked the turkey, and the pies, and all the rest for Christmas dinner, would not be home for Christmas.

When Alice called to see if she had heard any news, Martha told her the sad story, barely able to fight back her tears.

"Jill may not get here for two or three days," she said. "What was to be our very best Christmas is on the way to being our very worst." There was more than a hint of bitterness in Martha's voice.

"I'm very sorry that the storm will keep her away from home," said Alice, "but maybe this bad news can come to some good."

"How?" Martha asked.

"I've just found out that we have nobody to work at the homeless shelter tonight. George always does it every Christmas, but George is in bed with the flu. There's just no one else. Everyone else is with ... well, family. Is there any way you might help?"

Martha felt some resentment that Alice would be so cold as to move so quickly from sharing her disappointment, to asking her to do this job.

But, what had she to lose? She said yes, and in an hour she was down at the shelter, serving soup and opening cots. Normally she only helped out at the shelter during the day, on Thursday mornings. This was her first time at night, and Christmas Eve, of all nights.

She thought of Jill and her disappointment at how Christmas had turned out. The shelter wasn't too crowded. Some of the regulars had managed to find a place to go. But, there was plenty to do, being sure that the dozen or so men who had gathered were fed, folding out the cots, explaining the rules again.

About ten or eleven that night, a couple appeared at the door, a man and a woman no one had seen before. They were on their way to Des Moines, they explained, when their car broke down. For a couple of nights they had stayed in a cheap hotel. Then their money was gone, and the car was not fixed. They had nowhere to go. Could they stay here?

"Of course," said Martha as she welcomed them in. They were cold, tired and pitiful looking as they slurped up the soup she served them.

And then they talked. They told her about the car, and Martha told them about the blizzard and her disappointment because Jill couldn't be with her.

They had a daughter they said, living somewhere. They weren't sure where.

They consoled one another on the difficulties of parents and grown children. Martha found a box of cookies on one of the shelves. They opened them, passed them around the room, and there was an amazing amount of cheer, considering the circumstances.

Then it occurred to her. Here. Christmas Eve. A shelter for the homeless. The couple before her could have been on their way to Bethlehem as easily as on they're way to Des Moines. Here before her, thought Martha, were Mary and Joseph.

When all were asleep, about midnight, before she lay down on her cot by the kitchen counter to try and sleep, Martha looked out the window of the center.

It was night, but a bright moon was shining. The city was quiet, very quiet. And Martha found herself at peace. Despite everything, this Christmas Eve had not been a waste. God had been here, even here.

Before slipping off to sleep, Martha heard herself say,

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

What about you? Has this year been a bad one? Have things not worked out like you had hoped? Does the holiday make the pain in your life seem even worse?

Remember our Savior was also born in a fearful place and in a fearful time. He was born in a manger; and He is with us even here, even

now. The angels tell us, "Don't be afraid." Amen.

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