

“THE WONDER OF A MANGER” **by Rom A. Pegram**

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to his own town to register. ⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." ¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." ¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. – Luke 2:1-16 (NIV)

Christmas means many different things to different people. To some the wonder of Christmas is about bright lights and Christmas trees. To others it's about gathering with family and friends and exchanging presents. But for those of us who follow Jesus, the wonder of Christmas is about the birth of our Savior. And so, at Christmas, we focus on the nativity scene and the manger that held the precious Christ child.

I'll never forget when I was at Asbury College in Wilmore, Kentucky for my undergrad studies, a story went around there (and probably still does) about an incident that happened years before I got there. It was Christmas time and the Methodist Missions Agency had come to Asbury College for a special conference, and they brought with them a life-sized nativity scene as part of a display that had been hand-crafted by an African tribe.

Well, for what seemed like no reason at all, a couple of freshman at Asbury College—one actually a rather well-known United Methodist minister today—decided it would be a great prank to steal the baby Jesus. Somehow (though they didn't have security cameras then), a school official showed up at their dorm room the next day to inquire and let them know that they wanted the baby Jesus returned ... and NOW! One of the roommates denied stealing it, so the other went along...

They were thieves, yes, but they weren't hardened criminals, so they decided they'd better put the baby Jesus back where they found him. After all, you couldn't just throw baby Jesus in a lake or toss him in a dumpster; it was 'baby Jesus' after all. So the next night the two snuck back into the foyer of the Conference Center and put the baby Jesus back into the manger. Oh, did I mention that one of the two who did this is now a rather well-known United Methodist minister?

Truth be told, I've heard several stories like that over the years. It really isn't a 'new thing' for some prankster to steal a baby Jesus from a nativity scene. What's really surprising to me as I think about the Christmas story ... is that someone would have put Jesus in a manger in the first place! So, what is THE WONDER OF A MANGER? What can we learn from this 'unlikely crib' that can help awaken us to the wonder of Christmas? Well, there was a crib, an invasion, and a plan. Let's start with...

AN UNLIKELY CRIB. I think most of us would agree that we tend to 'romanticize' the manger—the whole nativity scene from the Christmas story, don't we? One way we romanticize the manger is through song. At Christmas, we often sing these familiar words...

*Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
The little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head.*

We sometimes 'romanticize' the manger, as if it were the bed of a 5 Star hotel that Jesus was laid in. But the manger was not a romantic experience for Joseph, Mary, or the baby Jesus, I assure you. Let me give you some background, so we're all on the same page with what was going on that night...

Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem—from Nazareth in Galilee, through Samaria, past Jerusalem, all the way to Bethlehem—to be counted for a census (*see map*). Bethlehem (House of Bread) was a small town in the region of Judea known as 'the city of David', because King David came from there (Lomira = the city of Luedtkes).

Mary was a young girl (early teens at most) who'd become pregnant out of wedlock. Joseph was a carpenter. There was nothing extraordinary about either of them; in fact, they were of the lower class of society.

When they arrived in Bethlehem, the town was at capacity because of people arriving for the government-ordered census that was going to take place there; so there was nowhere for Mary and Joseph to stay. Because travelers generally stayed at the home of relatives, the 'inn' was more like a guest room—and it was full. With quarters being so tight, Mary and Joseph found themselves bunking with the animals.

Here's something else: Houses in the 1st Century consisted of two levels. The top level would have been sleeping rooms, while the bottom level would have been the 'family area'—much like a den or family room, with the animals kept close by on the ground

level. Tradition depicts the Nativity scene like a stable out back, but it is possible that they were on the bottom level of someone's home or dwelling.

That same night, angels announced the royal and divine birth to ceremonially unclean (according to Jewish law) shepherders. Society, as you may already know, held shepherds in poor esteem. When the shepherds arrived to celebrate Jesus' birth, they saw the King lying in a manger—a feeding trough (*see picture*).

So, everything about the Nativity scene is humble and lowly—Luke's emphasis for sure. No one who was there that night (remember: the Wise Men came later) deserved to be in the presence of the divine, but God intentionally chose humble beginnings to show us the extent God would go to in order to save us all! *Oh, the wonder of a manger*—that God would set aside his deity and enter into our history as a vulnerable little baby ... in order to bring us back into a good relationship with himself!

Folks, I don't know of a better description of what happened that night than is found in my favorite Charles Wesley "And Can It Be that I Should Gain" (#363, UMH). Listen...

He left his Father's throne above
 (so free, so infinite his grace!),
 emptied himself of all but love,
 and bled for Adam's helpless race.
 'Tis mercy all, immense and free;
 for, O my God, it found out me!

And all this happened through a lowly manger in Bethlehem... So, THE WONDER OF A MANGER involved 'an unlikely crib' as well as...

A QUIET INVASION. The nature of Jesus' reign—from the very beginning—was not one of force! Jesus intended to win us over with love, not fear ... and this is so well illustrated through the manger itself...

The great missionary, E. Stanley Jones, in his book called 'Abundant Living' shares a story about a boy who was at a mission boarding school during WWII. Because of the fighting, the boy couldn't get home for the holidays. So when Christmas Day came, the boy was terribly sad and nothing could cheer him up. When he didn't come out of his room for dinner, the headmaster went to check on him. Trying to console the young boy, the principal asked what he would like for Christmas. The little guy looked at a photograph of his dad, which stood on his dresser, and with tears in his eyes he said, "I wish my father would step right out of that picture."

That's what happened on that starlit night in Bethlehem. No huge invasion of the world. No D-day kind of maneuvers from God. Jesus, the Son, simply stepped out of eternity, put on human flesh, and entered our world—a little bitty baby, born in Bethlehem, and placed in a manger.

John 1:14 (NIV) tells us, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” Theologians call this the Incarnation—Jesus, being fully God with a divine nature, also became fully human, possessing a body and living in space and time just like you and I do. (We’ll get back to the Incarnation more on Christmas Eve.) Here’s another way of looking at this part of the manger story...

A colleague and friend of mine—David Kalas, pastor of 1st UMC, Green Bay, says it this way: “I call Christmas ‘God’s sneak attack’ because he didn’t come into the world marching through the front door. He didn’t come with power or prominence, with influence or importance. He didn’t come into the spotlight. God came into the world through the back door. He snuck in.”

So, THE WONDER OF THE MANGER was about A QUIET INVASION. And finally, it was also about...

A DIVINE PLAN. Folks, you have to admit that Jesus’ entrance into this world was not the way we would have imagined it, but God’s ways are always full of wonder!

I know I’ve told some of you this before, but this pastor does not believe in *coincidences*—not when it comes to our relationship with God. What I do believe in are *God-incidences*. And I want you to understand this, for *without this understanding you’ll be missing out on ‘the wonder of the manger’...*

The location and circumstances of Jesus’ birth were not an accident or a misstep by the Angel Gabriel or Joseph! Not at all! They were divinely orchestrated. God sent the only begotten (sired/produced) Son in this humble way ... because God wanted us to know Jesus’ reign would be characterized by humility.

You see, Jesus came to show us the way to live—to demonstrate from his very beginning here that true greatness comes not by exalting yourself but by serving others...

Let me end with this: After the fall of the Iron Curtain, when communism came crashing down, the full extent of the evil that had scarred the environment and the people of this country became apparent. An American named Will Fish volunteered to go to Moscow and work with orphans who had been abused, and left in the care of a government-run program. Will shared this story from his experience there...

As the Christmas season was approaching, Will and his cohorts prepared to share the traditional Christmas story with the orphans—many who were hearing it for the first time. They told them about Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem and finding no room at the inn. They explained that Jesus was born in a stable, then placed in a manger. The children and coworkers of the orphanage sat attentively, listening with amazement.

When they'd finished their story, Will and the others gave the children 3 small pieces of cardboard and asked them to make a simple manger. They also gave each child a small square cut from the napkin for the baby Jesus. As Will walked among the children to see if they needed help, he came to a little boy named Misha, who appeared to be about 6 years old. Will noticed Misha's manger had not one but two babies in it, so he called for a translator to speak to the boy.

Though he'd heard the Christmas story just once, Misha accurately relayed what had happened until he came to the part where Mary put baby Jesus in the manger. Then he began to ad lib, and shared this:

And when Maria laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no mamma and I have no papa, so I don't have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with him. But I told him I couldn't, because I didn't have a gift to give him like everybody else did. But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought maybe if I kept him warm that would be a good gift. So I asked Jesus, 'If I keep you warm, will that be a good enough gift?' And Jesus told me, 'If you keep me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave me.' So I got into the manger and then Jesus looked at me and he told me I could stay with him—for always."

As Misha finished, his eyes were filled with tears that ran down his cheeks. He covered his face with his hand, lowered his head to the table, and sobbed. Will concludes his story of Misha with these words: "The little orphan had found someone who would never abandon him nor abuse him, someone who would stay with him—for always."

Exactly! That's what Jesus did for us... It's stunning how approachable God made Himself, isn't it? That, folks, is the Wonder of the Manger...