

December 24, 2022  
Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Eve  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## “Away in a Manger”

“And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”

*“Away in a manger”* was not where Mary wanted to give birth to her firstborn child. Like all first-time parents, Mary had dreamed of having her children in the comfort and safety of her home, surrounded by family and friends who would celebrate her child’s birth with her and her husband Joseph. While the Gospels give us few details about the home life of Jesus’ parents, we can imagine that they had planned to lay their newborn children in a comfortable crib that Joseph would have proudly made and offering the baby all the comforts and protection that parents of all generations have desired for their children.

No, *“away in a manger”* was not where Mary wanted to lay her newborn son; but she and Joseph had no choice, because *“in those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered”* (Luke 2:1). Luke reminds us that the birth of Jesus – and indeed the entire New Testament – takes place under occupation, under the onerous and tyrannical reign of the Roman Empire and its Emperor, Caesar Augustus, who arbitrarily decides to declare a census in the Empire for the purpose of taxing its subjected populations. In our time, taking a census involves little more than completing an online form or mailing a paper document; but in this time, a census required people to travel to their ancestral homelands to be counted and taxed. For Joseph and Mary, that meant leaving their hometown of Nazareth in Galilee *“to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David”* (2:4). We can imagine Mary’s feelings when she discovers that during the late stages of her pregnancy, she had to leave her comfortable home and the crib she and Joseph had prepared to lay their newborn child to make the long and difficult journey to a strange city where they knew no one and did not know where they could give birth to their child. This distress would be compounded when they arrived in Bethlehem to discover that *“there was no place for them in the inn”* (2:7), that the only dwelling available to them was a back-alley stable, where Mary *“gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger,”* a feeding trough where animals would eat. No, there was nothing about being *“away in a manger, no crib*

*for his bed*” that Mary desired the night she gave birth to her child far from home, in a strange place and in a strange city.

But while this birth was not what Mary had planned, the fact that Jesus was born “*away in a manger,*” away from home in that “*little town of Bethlehem,*” was neither an accident nor solely the result of Caesar Augustus’ decree, but is the fulfillment of God’s Will that we celebrate on this Christmas night as we are called to “*come to Bethlehem and see him whose birth the angels sing; come, adore on bended knee Christ the Lord, the newborn king.*” (ELW Hymn 289). Jesus is born in Bethlehem, the “House of Bread,” and laid in a manger, a feeding trough for animals. While this was not the place where Mary would have preferred to give birth to her firstborn son, his birth in this place is not by accident but is the fulfillment of God’s Will. Jesus, the Son of David, is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah that “*a child has been born to us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*” (Isaiah 9:6). The bringer of peace was born in Bethlehem in fulfillment of the prophecy of Micah that “*you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days.*” (Micah 5:2). The Saviour of all people was born during the reign of Caesar Augustus, who was lauded in the Empire as the “bringer of peace” but whose peace paled before the one whose birth was proclaimed by the angels. “*The Messiah born under Roman oppression would overthrow the powerful and raise up the oppressed.*” (Alan Culpepper).

Luke’s primary aim in his account of the birth of Jesus is to establish the birth of the Saviour in Bethlehem and in continuity with the royal house of David, fulfilling the covenant promise God made with David that “*I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever*” (2 Samuel 7:13). Luke’s basic conviction is that emperors, governments, and laws all serve the purposes of God, often without knowing it. For Luke, “*Caesar Augustus is more than a date for the story; he is an instrument of God’s Will.*” (Fred Craddock).

Luke keeps the story of Jesus’ birth clean of any decoration that would remove it from the lowly, the poor, and the marginalized of the earth. The Evangelist simply reports that while they were in Bethlehem “*the time came for her to deliver her child.*” (2:6). In that stable far from home, Mary “*gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped in bands of cloth*”; these “swaddling clothes” with which Mary wrapped her newborn child were a common practice that demonstrated maternal care and may have kept the child’s limbs straight (“*I was nursed in swaddling cloths.*” – Wisdom

of Solomon 7:4). Mary then laid her child in a manger “*because there was no place for them in the inn,*” which may have been a place where caravanners and pilgrims could spend the night in a guest room (“... *and say to the owner of the house, ‘Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’*” – 22:11) or the sleeping area in a single-room Palestinian peasant home. In a city filled to capacity with others who were forced to travel to Bethlehem because of Caesar Augustus’ decree, the birth of Mary’s child happens quietly, unnoticed by everyone except those who were “*away in a manger*” in the stable where the son of Mary was born.

Yet as uncomfortable and undesired were the circumstances of Jesus’ birth for the mother of our Lord, the manger plays a key role in the story of Jesus’ birth. For Luke, the manger is not a sign of poverty but is meant to evoke God’s complaint against Israel as spoken by the prophet Isaiah: “*The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner’s manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.*” (Isaiah 1:3). Luke is proclaiming that this dictum has been repealed: “*now, when the good news of the birth of their Lord is proclaimed to the shepherds, they go to find the baby in the manger and begin to praise God. In other words, God’s people have begun to know the manger of their Lord.*” (Raymond Brown).

The manger will be the sign by which those to whom the birth of Jesus is first proclaimed will know that this child is the fulfillment of God’s Will. It was customary in the Roman Empire for poets and orators to declare peace and prosperity at the birth of one who was to become emperor. In that familiar pattern comes good news of joy and peace; but this word comes from an angel, and the birth declared is of a child who will be called Saviour, Christ, and Lord. The announcement is made not to kings or emperors but to “*shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night*” (2:8). Shepherding was a despised profession at that time; shepherds were scorned as shiftless, dishonest people who often grazed their flocks on other people’s lands. Shepherds had to stay with their sheep, lead them to fertile grazing land and protect them from predators. Many shepherds failed to protect the sheep under their care, and their reputation deteriorated to the point where Jesus uses these “hired hands” as a contrast to his identification of himself as the “Good Shepherd:

- “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away – and the wolf snatches them. The hired hand runs away because the hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the

Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.” – John 10:11-15.

Yet is to these poor, despised shepherds that the good news of the birth of the Messiah is announced, fulfilling the words of the prophet Isaiah that Jesus will later announce as being fulfilled in his presence: “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor*” (Isaiah 61:1; Luke 4:18). The shepherds belong in Luke’s story not only because they serve to tie Jesus to the shepherd king David (“*I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel*” – 2 Samuel 7:8) but also because they belong on Luke’s guest list for the kingdom of God: “*But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind*” (14:13). As the shepherds outside of Bethlehem are “*living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night,*” the dark sky is suddenly lit by the appearance of “*an angel of the Lord [who] stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified*” (2:9). The angel acknowledges their terror, encouraging the shepherds to “*not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people*” (2:10). The word that the angel proclaims to the shepherds will be good news for all people, for the child born of Mary is the fulfillment of God’s promise of the coming of *Emmanuel*, “God is with us.” The angel proclaims that “*to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord*” (2:11). The angel announces that the birth of the child in Bethlehem is good news not only for his family, not only for the family of Israel, but is good news for people of all families and all nations – good news even for lowly shepherds.

- “The little word ‘you’ should make us joyful. For to whom does the angel speak? To wood or stones? No. He speaks to human beings; and not just to one or two, but to all the people ... Thus we should receive him joyfully, as here the angels say: ‘To you is born a Saviour.’ Is it not a great and marvelous thing that an angel should come from heaven with such good news? Is it not a wonder that afterwards so many thousands of angels are filled with overflowing joy, which makes them desire that we should also be glad, and should receive such grace with thankful hearts? And therefore we should write this little word (with flaming letters) in our hearts: ‘To you!’ and should joyfully welcome the birth of this Saviour.” – Martin Luther, Sermon for Christmas Day, 1544.

After announcing the birth of the child who is Saviour, Messiah, and Lord, the angel informs that shepherds that “*this will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped*

*in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.*” (2:12). The humble feeding trough where Mary is compelled to lay her newborn son is now the sign by which these first witnesses to the Christmas Gospel will know that God has fulfilled God’s promises, that the one who will offer the abundance of God’s gracious love is now present among them.

- “The manger is the place where animals find their food. But now, lying in the manger, is he who called himself the true bread come down from heaven, the true nourishment that we need in order to be fully ourselves. This is the food that gives us true life, eternal life.” – Pope Benedict XVI.

Before the shepherds can respond, a great army of angels appears in the heavens: *“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’”* (2:13-14). The angelic choir recalls the appearance of angels to Isaiah who *“called to another and said, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.’”* (Isaiah 6:3) and the voices that sing a new song in Revelation that *“you are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our Lord, and they will reign on earth”* (Revelation 5:9-10).

- “This is the story of the birth of a new kind of king. The birth reveals a new world order, a world not under Caesar but under the direction of God’s design for the redemption of all peoples. In this world, God’s Word is heard by the humble. There is a place even for shepherds.” – Culpepper.

Giving birth to her son “away in a manger” in that “little town of Bethlehem” was not where Mary would have desired the birth to take place; but neither the manger nor the city are accidental but are critical in the fulfillment of God’s Will in the birth of Mary’s son. *Bethlehem* means “house of bread,” and the child who is laid in a feeding trough is the one who will *“feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather his lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.”* (Isaiah 40:11). The child who is born not in his hometown of Nazareth but in the city of David known as the “House of Bread” will proclaim that *“I am the bread of” never be thirsty.*” (John 6:35). The baby laid in a place of feeding will host a meal for his disciples shortly before his death; *“while they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to his disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’”* (Matthew 26:26). The lowly manger becomes more than a poor substitute

for a real crib; it becomes the sign that “God is with us,” that the child born of Mary is the true bread that comes from heaven and gives life to all people, and that the message of the angels is good news to all who look with hope toward that little town of Bethlehem, where *“the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”*

- “Christmas belongs to those who recognize not the sense of the holidays but the real presence of God in their lives and in their world, not simply once upon a time long ago and far away but here and now, inhabiting our hearts and struggling with us against the tangible realities that surround us ... So we join with him and with one another in this feast of feasts on this day of days, for the gift of the Incarnation continues in the fellowship that we have with Christ around his Holy Table.” – Peter Gomes.

*“Away in a manger”* was not the place Mary wanted to be when she gave birth to her firstborn son; yet this strange place far from home was where the mother of our Lord fulfills her declaration to the angel Gabriel that *“here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”* (1:38). Mary’s son is born away in a manger in the little town of Bethlehem so that God’s Will might be accomplished, so that God’s mercy may be shown *“to those who fear him from generation to generation ... he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.”* (1:51-53). Mary gives birth to her son in Bethlehem and lays him in a manger so that we might be fed with the bread of eternal life, so that we might know that the message of this holy night is good news for us and for all people, so that we too may *“hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; oh, come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!”*

Amen.