

THE MEANING OF A MANGER

Knowing Jesus

Luke 2:1-7

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Bethany Church

Wesley J. Gabel

Many of you have made or will be making a Christmas journey. Some journeys are a trip! Do you know what I mean? They don't always go off as planned. One can make a wrong turn and get lost, can't they? Don't mention Philadelphia to my kids. That word gives them too much pleasure and too much ammunition to use with their father. It is possible to get lost or to get stranded? One Christmas season, a blizzard in rural Nebraska stranded Diane and me. We spent the night in a church with other college students watching the Disney movie, *Snowball Express*. The unplanned stop added to the fun; but the morning after, a mishap on icy roads added to our expense.

It is often difficult to see God's hand at work in the journeys we take, especially when we encounter problems. However, as we near the climax of the Christmas season, I

want to share some things from the first Christmas journey that can help us on our journey.

As residents of the 1st Century, Mary and Joseph believed in a spiritual world. They believed in a supernatural world where angels and demons had a real effect on what they experienced. They knew they had to travel to Bethlehem because of the government, but they may have seen Satan's hand more than God's in the trip because of the timing - it put Mary and her unborn baby at risk - and the reason. Caesar Augustus was no friend of Jews. Augustus was raised as a pagan priest. He became not only the first emperor of Rome but also its chief priest. Little about him suggested that God was working in and through him. Yet when this idolatrous priest and ruler gave a decree that forced all of the Jews to register in their native towns, God was working in his life and in the lives of two obscure peasants who had to obey. Paying tax to a foreign power and registering seemed contrary to the promises of God. Such behavior appeared more oppressive and compromising than divinely orchestrated.

Arriving when the town was jammed did not inspire confidence either. Joseph and Mary went to the stable in desperation. They probably felt attacked rather than led. When the Promise Keepers movement first came to the

Metrodome in Minneapolis, I started recruiting men. Some of you have seen me in recruiting mode, haven't you? Just the thought makes you sweat. Before I could register a single person, the dome had sold out. The next year it sold out before I could get through on a phone line. As a pastor looking for ways to inspire and equip men, I did not see God's hand in these circumstances. I felt snake-bitten. I don't think Mary and Joseph saw God's hand in their circumstance. I think they felt oppressed. They could not sense God's hand in their situation. How about you? Is the hand of God missing? Is it MIA, missing in action?

Occasionally, I visit with skeptics who challenge the validity of the gospel. Often they tell me that Jesus is an imaginary figure constructed in literature to fit the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible. There are many problems with that claim. One I've never seen them consider is the prophecies themselves. So much prophecy cited in the New Testament did not look like prophecy. Others seemed to have already been fulfilled before Jesus came. The only explanation for their citation is that when the disciples witnessed the events of Jesus' life and then reread the Scriptures, they realized that either those events were predicted or that Jesus gave the highest meaning to things said hundreds of years earlier. Reading the Old Testament

prophecies was a "Wow!" event for them. "Wow, look at this!" they'd exclaim. "God planned this!"

As hard as it is to see God's hand when we are anxious and troubled, the manger in Bethlehem points to its presence. Part of the meaning of the manger is that God's hand is in the events of your life. You may be sick. You may be hurt. You may be depressed. You may feel lost. But the manger reveals that God loves you and that God is active in your life. The manger indicates that God is quietly working in your situation. God is at work in the unfolding events of your life. The manger is an object lesson illustrating the truth of a Bible verse I memorized as a teenager. "In all things God works for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose." That verse helped me when I was a teenager in a difficult time of loss, and the manger illustrates that truth. The manger points to a God who works in unexpected places and in unexpected ways to bring healing to humanity.

I think of another verse. This one came from King Solomon. He wrote: "***In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps***" (Prov. 16:9). This doesn't mean that God brings us evil; instead, it suggests that a loving God is a lot more involved in our lives than we consider.

Remembering that, let's ask some more questions. The manger that held Jesus was located in a stable of Bethlehem. Why did God want Jesus to be born in Bethlehem rather than Jerusalem? Why did God plan for Bethlehem and put the name of that town in the mouths of his prophets? Why did God direct the steps of Mary and Joseph to the manger in Bethlehem?

The word Bethlehem means *house of bread*. Perhaps, shepherds or travelers found or were provided food in that locale. Whatever the case, the *house of bread* became host to the *bread of life*. God sent the *bread from heaven* that gives life to the world to a little village named *house of bread*. In the birth of Jesus, Bethlehem was fulfilling its name and purpose in a way it could not fathom. Even more, the first crib of the *bread of life* was a feeding trough. How appropriate! The bread was laid in a feeding trough.

Curiously, the bread for the world was unveiled in a stable that sheltered and fed animals. I don't know how many of you are animal lovers, but do you realize the first witnesses to Jesus' birth were domesticated animals. Jesus was even put in *their* feeding trough. All creation longs for redemption. The good news of Christ was not just for humans. All creation received a savior. The lamb will lie

down with the lion. Life came with Jesus for all that God loved and created.

One thousand years before Christ, God chose the young shepherd, David, from the village of Bethlehem to eventually go to Jerusalem and lead a people in fully realizing the promise of a new land. Now in the same town, the home of shepherds, a new shepherd was born. This child would be the shepherd of shepherds. He would be the shepherd that would lead us to realize the promise of our creation. He would restore us as children of God. Therefore God sent shepherds not rulers to that cradle; and God sent a shepherd to save us, not a ruler to subjugate us. God never wanted our subjugation. God never wanted to force servitude on us. We were not created for slavery. We were formed as royalty to live as companions and partners of almighty God.

So from the house of bread came *the Bread of Life*. From the home of shepherds came *the Good Shepherd*. In a shelter for creatures came the hope of creation. Though the setting lacked dignity, the timing appeared terrible and the circumstance looked unfortunate, everything was appropriate. God's love was birthing salvation for all creation. In unexpected, unconventional and hidden ways God acted in his love for you and me.

What do you see in that manger? Do you see more than a picture from history? Do you see more than a comforting story? Do you realize that you were chosen for this time? Do you believe that God is working in the events of your life?

So few saw the manger. So few recognized the child. So many missed what God was doing. As angels sang and dance, they worried themselves into ulcers. As heaven celebrated, they cried in loneliness. As baby Jesus grew, they felt hopeless. Will you miss the joy and peace they did? Or will you look at the manger and worship in awe?

Will you welcome your savior? Will you trust his hand even when you can't trace it? Will you embrace your shepherd, your savior, your Lord? God loves you. Welcome the bread and savior he sent you. Welcome him right now!