

The Lure of the Manger

In his book entitled Rumours of Another World, Philip Yancey tells a story which grew out of his church's baby-sitting ministry to young mothers. Periodically, his church schedules what they call "Mom's Night Out," with free babysitting for single mothers who need a night off or for mothers who want to spend a private evening with their husbands (We call our's Kid's Night Out), but back to Yancey. On one occasion his pastor's wife took advantage of this service to enjoy a night out with her husband, and their three-year-old son was left with a babysitter from their church. When they returned later that evening to pick up their son, and asked the babysitter about her experience with their son, the babysitter related the following. She said, "We played a game in which I asked your son, 'what is mommy's favorite thing to do with you?'" His three-year-old response, based on much experience was: "clean me up. Mommy's favorite thing to do with me is to clean me up."

The pastor told the story from the pulpit the following Sunday with the following correction. "In truth . . . that isn't Susan's favourite thing to do with her son. Cleaning him up is an excuse to hold him. Absorbing the mess is just part of the process of getting close." Then the pastor made the following application: "And it's the same with God."

I hope you understand: Christmas is often a warm and wonderful time for us, but it was not so for God. Jesus did not enjoy the prickly straw in the manger, or taking on the limitations, sufferings, and vulnerabilities of human flesh. Nor did He enjoy Hanging from nails on a cross. He did not enjoy being rejected, verbally abused and brutally tortured and killed. We must also understand that Jesus takes no pleasure in shouldering our failure and sin. He gets no reward from our guilt and self-loathing. There's nothing pretty about absorbing and cleaning up our mess, but if that's what it takes to bring us into His embrace; well then, He'll do it gladly.

Hebrews 12:2 tells us about Jesus, *"the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame . . ."* The joy set before Him is the joy of being able to hold us close and to bring us without spot or blemish into the presence of His Father in Heaven. In Mark 10:45, Jesus says: *"For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many."* He ministered to be close to us

and gave His life to draw us close to Him. He doesn't enjoy cleaning up our messes but He loves to draw us close.

Did you ever stop to wonder about God's strange entrance into the world? I mean at least in the short run, it wasn't very effective. If the idea was to make a splash and get man's attention, the birth of a baby in a cow shed in an obscure corner of a small village in Palestine was hardly the way to do it. In fact, almost no one even noticed. The only ones who noticed were a few shepherds tending their sheep on the Judean hillside and some stargazers in Persia. Most of the world didn't have a clue that anything was happening, and didn't care. Sure, the shepherds went out and told the story after they had seen the baby, but they were not effective as PR men or traveling evangelists. There is no indication that anyone else was particularly impressed by their story, nothing to indicate that anyone else even bothered to check it out for themselves. So, why does God visit us as a baby?

I once had a good friend who was not particularly fond of Christmas. He didn't put much stock in the stories about Jesus' birth as told by Matthew and Luke and preferred the Gospels of Mark and John, as they present Jesus only as an adult. My friend wasn't exactly Ebenezer Scrooge, but he didn't like the all the fuss about Christmas. He particularly didn't like the sentimentality associated with the holiday. I think he saw the whole thing as weak-minded, theologically suspect, and spiritually bankrupt.

And, on the one hand, I appreciated my old friend's skepticism; it warned me not to confuse truth with legend. On the other hand, I felt sorry for my friend. I thought something bad must have happened to him in his childhood; maybe he wanted something very badly for Christmas and was disappointed. Maybe his belief in Santa Claus was stolen from him way too soon. My old friend lives far away now and I miss talking with him, but I don't miss his complaints about Christmas.

I feel sorry for anyone who cannot appreciate the mystery and the magic of Christmas. I feel sorry for anyone whose heart is not warmed, who feels no motivation to give, who sheds no tears of joy—sorry for anyone who misses the romance and wonder of Christmas.

It seems to me that anyone who misses all of this misses the point. Christmas is after all a love story. At first it reads like a human love story: Joseph and Mary were pledged to be married to each other.

Then their love is put to the test by Mary's unexplainable pregnancy and confirmed by Joseph's willingness, against all odds and all reason, to receive it as a gift from God. Later, the love story is taken to a higher level, and we are told: "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." Romans 5:8 puts it: But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

You see, Christmas is supposed to touch our hearts and engage our emotions. Christmas is meant to get under our rational defenses and change us from the inside out. It's supposed to soften us up, make us more childlike, make us more receptive and attuned to the presence of God among us. It's meant to persuade us to allow ourselves to be loved and to love. We are after all saved by faith not by sight. God catches us off guard with the manger and means to. Would you say, "Soften my heart," "Lord Jesus."

A second reason God comes to the manger is that He desires to remind us that God is not in league with or impressed by the rich and powerful of this world. The kings of the world, as illustrated in the wise men, will come and bow down to Him not the other way around. By the same token humble shepherds, carpenters, and humble housewives are given the star roles in His epic story. The poor, who would never dare enter a palace are made to feel at home and welcomed in the stable.

Christmas is pictured as the beginning of the fulfillment of Isaiah's vision outlined in Isaiah 9:2-4; 6-7: Isaiah says, *"The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine. You will enlarge the nation of Israel, and its people will rejoice. They will rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest and like warriors dividing the plunder. For you will break the yoke of their slavery and lift the heavy burden from their shoulders. You will break the oppressor's rod, just as you did when you destroyed the army of Midian. . . . For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of*

Peace. His government and its peace will never end. He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David

for all eternity. The passionate commitment of the LORD of Heaven's Armies will make this happen!"

We notice here that Isaiah's prophecy is a message of comfort to the poor and oppressed; it is the promise of deliverance and justice for those who have no power to defend themselves. By being born to a conquered and oppressed people, God sides with the powerless and lifts up the heads of all those who are bowed down. He restores dignity to those who have been humiliated and hope to those who have lived in despair. The manger in Bethlehem encourages us that God will enter the humblest of places and into our hearts, if only we will prepare Him room. Would you say, "Come into my heart," "Lord Jesus."

God comes to the manger to soften our hearts and to proclaim his love for all who will humble themselves before Him. Finally, it seems to me this morning that Jesus comes to the manger to lure us in—to be live bait—in God's fishing expedition for men. The Bible tells us that He came *"to seek and to save that which was lost."* The Bible tells us that He appointed apostles with the promise to make them *"fishers of men."* But before God sent the apostles out to fish He came fishing for them. Before God sends us out to fish for others, He comes fishing for us. The babe in the manger lures us in.

All babies seem to have the ability to get our attention, to draw us close. I've seen several in the past couple of weeks when I've been out and about. One was in the elevator at the hospital. I asked, "How old?" and the mother replied "5 weeks."

There's just something awesome about newborns. They are so small and yet everything is already on board. Their tiny fingers and toes have nails. Their little eyes have lashes. Their brains are up and running.

In fact, infant brains are incredible. Scans that have been performed on babies' brains show much more activity than in adult brains. They are "firing on all cylinders," so to speak, processing and storing new information many times faster than an old worn-out brain like mine. I love to watch toddlers looking around gathering visual information about their surroundings. And, while they are looking, they are also hearing, smelling, and tasting everything they can get their hands on. Their

5

hunger for knowledge and ability to learn is positively astounding.

Ultimately, I guess, their attraction comes from the fact that babies are as close as we can get to creation; babies are miracles in the making, so that looking at them has the potential to open our eyes to see God.

This being true of infants in general, I suppose it should not be so surprising after all that God should come to us as a baby in a manger. He draws upon that ancient instinct He planted within us that serves the survival of our species. We see the baby Jesus as one of our own. We worry about His safety in the cattle stall. We find ourselves wanting to protect Him, wanting to hold Him close, wanting to provide a home for Him.

This brings us very near to the mystery of what God is aiming at. God is fishing for us and the baby in the manger is the lure God uses to draw us close. And, once we are close and our hearts are open, God's plan of salvation can proceed. The child in the manger is the Savior King, and though many will reject Him, to those who receive Him, He will give the power to become the children of God.

You see He draws us close and gives us the desire to hold and nurture Him so He can hold, nurture, forgive and heal us. He invites us to catch Him so that He can catch us and give us everlasting life. He comes from heaven to earth to bring us back to heaven. To surrender to the lure of the manger is to look on the face of God and to experience the embrace of His love. Our salvation begins there—in swaddling clothes—and in the straw.

The Fourth Street Church of God

2001 Fourth Street
Altoona, PA 16601
942-1007/946-4110

Sermon for December 17, 2017

The Lure of the Manger

Matthew 1:20-21; Luke 2:1-7

Jon R. Neely, Pastor

neelyjon@gmail.com
4thstcog.com