

Christmas Eve Late
December 24, 2016

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The angels said to the shepherds, "This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When families get together for important birthdays, for Thanksgiving, for Christmas, they often tell family stories. "Remember the time when Uncle Julius took the old Ford out on the day after Thanksgiving and a bear ate the bumper?" These stories often are told the same way so that certain phrases are repeated over and over. In the Bible there are many of these phrases that are repeated in the retelling of stories. "And God brought the Children of Israel of the house of bondage with a mighty and outstretched hand." And "the waters stood up like walls on the right hand and the left." Often in these narratives, there is something odd or funny that makes the story worth telling.

So it is with tonight's retelling of the birth of Jesus. There is one particular phrase that is repeated three times. Listen again: "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger." "This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." "So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger." What is it about this birth that everyone remembered? What was the odd thing that made it memorable? What was the thing that was unusual enough to be a sign? Let's hear it----. You got it, the baby was in a manger.

I once made the mistake in a children's homily of trying to use more familiar language that the kids would understand. So I referred to the fact that the baby Jesus was

laid in a feeding trough. Immediately a small had shot up, and an indignant voice cried out, "It wasn't a feeding trough; it was a manger." Such is the power of a tale's rhetoric.

So the baby was laid in a manger. Why is that so important? First of all it was simply odd. It's odd enough to be a mark that will tell the shepherds which baby is the one the angel was talking about. How many of us would think of putting our newborn in the frame that normally holds hay for cattle to eat? Second, perhaps there is a symbolic notion here. The hay the manger would normally hold nourishes cattle in the long days of winter, when there is no growing grass outside to eat. Now the manger holds the true bread of the world which came down from heaven to give us new life in the time when other nourishment does not suffice. Maybe it is important simply to mark the humility of God that, not only did God come in human flesh, not only did God come as a weak and helpless baby, God came to a family that had no shelter except a stable, and had no crib, but had to use a cattle stall. But maybe, just maybe, the manger is important simply because it is a little silly and it makes us laugh.

I don't know. What I do know is that we cannot have Christmas without the manger. It just doesn't work. Tomorrow morning we will hear the divine theology of the prologue to John's Gospel: In the beginning was the Word... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." That gives the story cosmic meaning, but the Word made flesh was still a baby laid in a manger.

For myself, it makes me remember that the ordinary, the physical, the small things are what bring God to us. These are what carry God in our midst. Events that change the world come in hay, and diapers, and lamplight. Cosmic changes come in things and events, and these little every day bits of life mean everything.

It means that the things, events, and relationships in our lives can be full of the presence of God. It means that the things, events, and relationships in our lives can be important. It means the things, events, and relationships in our lives can change the world. It means that the things, events, and relationships in our lives are worth pondering in our hearts.

God gives God's greatest gift to us in the form of flesh and blood, a new human being. So it is appropriate that we celebrate God's gift by giving one another physical objects for Christmas. The gifts are how we show love. The Gift is how God shows love.

So the shepherds come and gape. They see the baby just as the angel said, lying in a manger. They tell anyone who will listen, what the angels said about this child, that he will be the Savior. So it is that Mary, hearing the shepherds, pondered these things in her heart. So it is that we take time from gifts and decorations and food and family to come aside for an hour and gaze at the wonder, the simple, humble, funny wonder of the baby in a manger. We hear the extravagant promises of the angels, and we ponder it all in our hearts. We know that God has come among us. And we know that the future is bright with the promise of the Child.