

“Come and Behold Him”

Luke 2:1-20

We read the familiar story of Jesus’ birth according to the gospel of Luke. Maybe it has become so familiar that we miss the fact that the story was actually a more explosive revelation than any nativity scene one might create in their yard. And yet, when God reveals the coming arrival of his Son, it isn’t at a party, nor is it a media event. The reveal takes place in some quiet places: through the words of prophets, in the quiet of a tiny cave in the nowhere town of Bethlehem to a young girl engaged to be married, to shepherds, societal outcasts, sleeping in fields. God doesn’t seem interested in making the arrival of Jesus a media event. Luke makes this clear and, in a way, sets up a contrast between Jesus and Caesar, whom he mentions at the beginning of Chapter 2. Caesar Augustus didn’t do anything without making it a media event — the media in those days being heralds and coinage. Augustus had coins minted announcing that he was a “son of god” (in his case, being the adopted son of Julius Caesar, whom Augustus and others considered to be divine in some sense). “Lord” was a title reserved for Caesar, as was “Prince of Peace.” Luke makes it clear in telling these announcement stories that Jesus is the true Son of God, the world’s true Lord, and the real bringer of peace, but the announcement doesn’t take place in the halls of the Roman or Judean government or in the first-century equivalent of social media. The announcement appears in nowhere places to people who are nobodies.

And the announcement isn’t just, “It’s a boy!” It’s an announcement about his purpose. The angel tells Mary that he will be the holy “Son of God” (Luke 1:36).

The angel tells the shepherds that he will be their “Savior”, who is “the Messiah, the Lord”: the world’s true king and Lord (2:12). In Rome, the army would sing their allegiance to Caesar, but in a field outside Bethlehem the angel armies of God declare his praise: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors” (v.14).

It’s the announcement that God has broken into a broken world, not in a heavenly display of fireworks, but in the form of a leaky, burpy, tiny human child. And this baby, fully human and fully divine, born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, will forever redefine humanity. The real announcement of Christ is that, in the coming of Jesus, God has rebooted the human race through a tiny baby in a manger . . .

“Away in a manger, no crib for a bed, the little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head.”

It’s a beloved carol. Sometimes called “Luther’s Cradle Hymn”, this song was actually written in the U.S. to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Martin Luther’s birth in 1883.

We’re so used to singing these words about Baby Jesus in the manger that we’re no longer as shocked by the image as we should be.

Stop and think for a minute about the jarring difference. A manger is made for animals, not humans. Babies belong in a crib or cradle, made for tender nurture. But the Babe lies in a manger – hard, harsh, filled with prickly hay. The song is sweet and gentle, but the reality was not.

The word “manger” means to eat. A manger was a receptacle for animal feed.

And yet in God's strange and unexpected ways, the manger becomes the precious vessel that holds the Christ Child. When the shepherds and the wise men come in search of the promised savior, it's not in a royal cradle but in a humble manger that they find him.

For Luther, the manger was a powerful symbol, not just of Christmas but of Christian life. No doubt that's why the carol was written with him in mind. Luther uses the image of the manger in several surprising ways.

First, in his Prefaces to the Old Testament, Luther describes the Scriptures as a manger. "Here you will find the swaddling cloths and the manger in which Christ lies, and to which the angel points the shepherds," Luther wrote. "Simple and lowly are these swaddling cloths, but dear is the treasure, Christ, who lies in them."

Just as the manger in Bethlehem so long ago held the infant Jesus, so the Scriptures hold the Christ for us today.

There's another way that Luther uses the manger image too. In a Christmas Eve sermon, Luther describes the congregation itself as the manger in which the Christ Child is found.

"What else is the manger than the gathering of the Christian people in church to listen to the sermon?" Luther asked.

Congregation as manger? What can that mean? Except that the congregation, too, becomes the place where people are invited to come and see the Christ Child. The manger is not a place but a people, an event. The church testifies to the living presence of Jesus just as surely as the angels told the shepherds, just as surely as the star led the wise men.

At this time of year, normally without the virus, congregations set up manger scenes on their grounds. We normally have a live Mary and Joseph, baby Jesus and shepherds. Luther suggests that the congregation itself is the real living nativity: live-action people who welcome the Christ Child and who welcome those who come looking for the Christ Child.

The real action takes place not out on the lawn but inside the church when the Christian community gathers for worship and witness. That's when visitors see the real Christmas story unfold before them.

Being the manger – this is a wonderful responsibility.

Luther is quick to remind us, though, that we mustn't take ourselves too seriously. The Christmas story isn't about the manger. It's about the Babe. "For not all mangers hold Christ and not all sermons teach the faith", Luther warned.

When we focus on ourselves, then we "cease being Christ's little manger, and become the manger of cavalry horses, filled with physical fodder", he wrote.

We don't invite people to come to see us – but to see and be with Christ.

How can we live up to this precious responsibility of being Christ's manger, of holding up the Christ Child for others? In this same Christmas Eve sermon, Luther identifies us not only with the manger but with the humble barnyard creatures: "We are the animals that go with this manger. There Christ is placed before us, and with this food we are to feed our souls". We are able to offer Christ to others because he first offers himself to us. It's that simple.

The manger, by definition, is a feedbox. Many congregations sponsor food pantries for the needy, as do we, but Luther encourages us to think more deeply. When we recognize ourselves as mangers, then the congregation itself becomes a food pantry for all who hunger. In the congregation we find the Christ Child.

In the congregation we find food for our spiritual nurture. And in the congregation, we offer that nurture to others.

And that's the real surprise revealed on Christmas Eve. Not only is Jesus revealed as the world's true Savior and Lord, it's also the revelation that we, too, can be reborn as men and women who live the purpose and vocation for which we were created. As John puts it, when we receive Christ and believe in his name, we are given "power to become children of God, who were born not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13). Jesus would tell Nicodemus that becoming a child of God requires being "born from above" and "born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:3, 5).

It's the good news of the gospel that is revealed in Jesus Christ. It's the good news that it doesn't matter where you came from, where you were born, what the circumstances were; it doesn't matter what your past looks like, what sins you've committed, what hurts and brokenness you have in your life. The good news is that Christ has come to offer you a new birth, a new beginning. His grace makes it possible for you to be forgiven, your life to be transformed; you can be made new! All you must do is receive him and let his grace and love catch fire in your life.

The Savior of the world has been revealed and laid in a manger. His coming, humanity and purpose were quietly revealed centuries before by prophets like Isaiah, who celebrated him as a child “born for us, a son given to us” who is the “Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father” and the true “Prince of Peace” who establishes the reign of God’s kingdom (Isaiah 9:6-7).

And that Savior reveals to us how we, too, can be revealed as people made new by his sacrificial and forgiving love.

May the peace of God . . .

#277 – Away in a Manger