

Illustrations of Immanuel: Manger of Mercy

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Advent

Luke 2:6-16 ⁶ So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. ⁷ And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. ⁸ Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. ¹⁰ Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. ¹¹ "For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² "And this *will be* the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" ¹⁵ So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.

Tonight, we consider the illustration of a manger, which is not a grand, great or powerful picture but rather a lowly and humble one. It is one of the best illustrations of Immanuel, because it reminds us that the son of God humbled himself and came to earth not to show off his power but to suffer and die in our place. It is a symbol not of God's power but of his mercy.

This manger is the place to find Immanuel.

Three times Luke repeats this truth, that Jesus was lying in a manger.

Luke 2:7 wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger,

Luke 2:12 this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger."

Luke 2:16 And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.

Three times in nine verses, that's once every three verses. This one seemingly insignificant fact is more important to Luke than the governor of Syria, more important than angels appearing in the sky, more important even than where Mary and Joseph were staying. He does not mention even once where they were staying, but three times he repeats that Jesus was laid in a manger.

Why is the manger so important to Luke? Because that is where you find God.

The angels direct the shepherds to look for a manger, not because a manger is such an amazing sight to see but because that is where they will find a Savior who is both Christ and Lord. If the shepherds wanted to see something grand and exciting, they could have gone to Rome where Augustus had recently become the Emperor of the whole roman empire. They came to the manger to find the Christ.

There are many things happening at Christmas time that are exciting, bright, and fun, and it's not wrong to do those things, but first we need to come to the manger. We come to the place where God is in his word and sacrament, not because it is the most exciting thing but to see Jesus and to receive from him the forgiveness of our sins.

This manger is a sign of God's mercy.

Now the angels call this manger a sign. But we have to admit that we are a little disappointed in God. It's not a particularly good sign. This is not the type of sign that we would expect or want from God. Where is the fire from heaven like Elijah on the mount caramel? Where is the parting of the red sea, the pillar of fire, the rainbow in the heavens? Where are the fireworks? At least some balloons and birthday cake would be nice but instead all that we get is a manger. That is a feeding trough for the animals.

But that is the whole point of the manger. It is not a night for God to be God. It is a night for God to be man.

In the past God has given signs in heaven above and on earth below. He has shown his wrath in the flood and his power on top of mount Sinai. He sent fire from heaven and guided his people in the wilderness. All these things bore witness to the power and glory of God. But not the manger. The manger is where God comes not to show off his power but to show off his mercy, and grace.

John 1:16-17 And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

If we are looking for proof of God's power, or that Jesus is God, if we want to see divine justice or glory, the manger is not the best place to come. But if we want a reminder of God's mercy on sinners, that Jesus came for all even for me, that Jesus comes to the homes of shepherds and sinners, then the manger is a great sign reminding us that Jesus is Immanuel, God with us. He is the God who humbled himself and became man.

This manger is easily overlooked.

The manger is a lowly thing and stands in sharp contrast to all the great deeds that are happening in the wider world.

Augustus is busy establishing the pax Romana, an earthly peace that stretched from Spain and Britain all the way to Persia and Egypt. Quirinius was busy ruling the province of Syria. Everyone is busy getting registered. Everyone is busy accomplishing important things, running around here and there, building roads and aqueducts and empires. Bethlehem itself was filled with people running around doing things. Luke reminds us that there was no room in the inn.

Meanwhile, the angels send the shepherds to find a feeding trough, and there in a lowly manger Immanuel is born.

It is so easy to run past the manger without noticing. It is so easy to overlook a babe lying a manger. But the angels tell the shepherds to set aside the big important work of watching the sheep and instead go and look in a feeding trough.

Unfortunately, the manner in which we celebrate Christmas often just gives us more reason to ignore Christ rather than take the time to see Him. There are so many big important things going on like eating Christmas cookies. But there is only one thing that we really need to do every Christmas, leave the sheep, and go to the manger. There we find Immanuel who has come to give us peace.

The manger holds him who has come to give us peace and the forgiveness of sins.

The manger reminds us of Immanuel, God with us. It reminds us how Jesus set aside the glory and power of God and humbled himself. He was born as man to take our place under the law and to die for our sins. He did not come to rule the world with power and might but rather through grace and mercy to save us from our sins.