

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

Christmas Eve

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Text: Luke 2:1-10

Title: “The Journey: The Manger—presence”

When I was in high school one of my best friends was from a farm family. As we grew up together, he and I hoed fields together, picked peppers and beans together, hunted and fished in his father’s marsh together. And when we were old enough and strong enough, his uncle --who also raised cattle-- hired us along with a handful of other high school students to bail hay. Bailing hay back then was done by hand. The bailer spit out the wrapped bails but picking them up meant spending the day in the fields, walking alongside the flat top wagon, picking up the bail and tossing it up on the wagon where the wagon-tender would then stack the bails. Move to the next bail, toss it on the wagon. A lot of repetition over many acres of land. It was hot dusty work. Every time I picked up a bail and tossed it, dust flew everywhere. My hair was covered with dust--my face, and if I forgot to close my mouth...yep, I’d get a very dry snack that resulted in spitting and hacking.

But that wasn’t the worst part. The worst part was hauling the fully stacked wagon back to the barn to unload it because in this farm operation the back half of the barn was occupied by the herd. That meant manure, and because it was summer, it meant hot manure and a lot of it. Every summer, the stench was so overwhelming I nearly vomited the first time we’d go back to the barn with a full load. After the first load, I’d get used to it somehow and the nausea wouldn’t be a problem, but the first round always brought a rising lump in my throat.

So when I read this beautiful story of Jesus’ birth and I think of the nostalgia--the silent night, the shepherds, and the babe lying in a manger--I’m reminded that places in which animals live are not usually very sterile. In fact, if you’re not used to it you might be feel an unwelcomed, rising lump in your throat.

One prominent UM pastor, Adam Hamilton, has written about the nativity night reminding people that this night was likely not a very silent night, what with animals and visitors and the noise of child birth and all. The vision of a sterilized, almost-fairy-tale-like version of this story isn’t likely how it went down.

Mary and Joseph are housed in what was likely a cave. Caves were routinely used as stables in those days. Think straw-covered floor and stone walls. Safe but not very sanitary. Think animal smells, maybe not the kind of stench of the manure-covered floor of my bailing days but certainly something less pleasant than the hospital birthing room. Mary on the birthing stool. The mid-wife coaching and preparing to take care of the baby. The cries of the birth mother and the anxious father probably pacing outside.

But when the cord was cut and the baby cleaned up and wrapped in cloth, we read that he was then placed in a feeding trough, a manger because for whatever reason there wasn’t a better place available for them to stay.

And the first guests? Not grandparents or dignitaries, not priests or kings, but low-class field hands. Shepherds, who weren't highly thought of as people go. With their fantastical story of a messenger and the glory of the Lord around them. This wasn't their usual evening experience in the field. Star filled skies, sure. A bright full moon, yes. But this was something different, so different it left them fearful which is why the messenger's first words were, "Don't be afraid." But there was more to be said,

“...for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

Once again, we hear of the feeding trough, a place from which animals are fed. And then the choir shows up and sings: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.”

When the concert is over, these field hands decide to follow up on this message they'd received from God. Under a star-filled sky they quickly hike through the hills to the nearby village. And there, once again, we hear about this feeding trough in which they found the babe lying, Mary and Joseph very nearby.

The first church I served out of seminary had some folks who owned a dairy farm and the head herdsman was the church's lay leader. He was with the cows 7 days a week, and when he came to church, the smell of the herd was with him. He couldn't wash it away. It was simply part of who he was, and nobody who knew this kind and gracious man really cared.

I remember Larry when I think of the shepherds visiting the cave stable where the animals and the Holy Family were staying, and Jesus lying there tightly wrapped as often new born infants are, but in a place unlikely, a place unexpected for someone who is the newborn King and Savior of the world. People of power aren't born in places like this. People of power—like Emperor Augustus who no doubt completely disrupted Mary and Joseph's plans by forcing them to make an 80 mile trek on foot—or by donkey—people of power like him aren't born in a barn but in palaces and given the best medical care money can buy. People of power don't get told where to go under such circumstances. They make the decrees that result in people like Joseph and Mary traveling when it makes no sense to travel. People like Augustus—who was also called son of god and savior, they don't spend their first few hours on earth in a feeding trough, but in the finest cribs made by the finest craftsman.

But you see the God known in Jesus is different than the god of Augustus. The God known in Jesus gives “good news of great joy for all the people”, not just the powerful. The God known in Jesus tells low-class field hands first: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.” And just to be sure that all people means all people, some foreigners show up from the east sometime later, likely Zoroastrian priests from what is now Iran, the magi come with expensive gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. They're not Jewish. They're not even from the same country, let alone the same zip code.

The God who comes in the babe lying in a manger is different than the one Augustus claimed as his father. This God of the manger somehow strangely trusts human beings enough to get vulnerable, enough to invite us to come close enough to adore him and love him, not as a result of the kind of power that can command an army and force innocent people to obey orders but rather the kind of power that can save a life through the strength of unfailing love.

I believe in the power of the love of the manger-born Christ not because the church or the people in it are always the best examples or the most faithful in expressing that divine love. We aren't. We are all on a journey and we practice our faith but we aren't always perfect, but we keep working on our

relationships with God, one another and our neighbors. One of our congregation's core values states that we are "imitating our Lord by practice, practice, practice realizing that none of us are perfect, but we are all on the faith journey together."

One of the beautiful and most powerful expressions in this story is that God embraces our imperfections. God enters the messiness of the world with its unpleasant odors of stable and shepherds and its orders by tyrants with one version of power. God comes into the world humbly through humble people, sharing the news with low-class field hands and foreigners of a different religion that God has "good news of great joy for all the people," not just for some. For you and your neighbor. For the Palestinian and the Israeli, the Russian and the citizen of the United States, for the Cuban and the Mexican, the Liberian and the Kenyan, the people we love and the people we despise. "All" the people: that's who this babe in a manger has come to save.

Three times the Gospel According to Luke mentions the manger. The first mention is in verse 7 of chapter 2 when Mary is said to have wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger. The second comes in v. 12 through the messenger who brings the news to the shepherds telling them of the sign: a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. The third is found in v. 16 in which the shepherds find "...the child lying in a manger." What isn't said is that Bethlehem, the village in which he is born, means in Hebrew, "the house of bread". What isn't said is that the one lying in the manger would proclaim in the Gospel According to John,

"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

So the "bread of life" was born in "the house of bread" and placed in a feeding trough from which animals received their food. The metaphor is clear. This is the place we come to be fed by the power of God.

We have been engaging in a study in this congregation throughout Advent called "The Journey". Four groups have been meeting at various times over 5 sessions to explore the Christmas story from various points of view. In the class I facilitated, we were talking about being fed at the manger and the night that probably wasn't very silent and the disorderly nature of the story forcing the couple to leave home and travel 80 miles on foot in the last month or so of Mary's pregnancy which made no sense. We talked about the shepherds who weren't trusted or highly regarded, low-class field hands. It took the shine off this story in some ways. It's not all nice and neat and polished and sterile.

But then that's the way life really is, isn't it? It's not all neatly tied up, wrapped up beautifully with a ribbon and a bow. Life is a journey that brings the unexpected and sometimes the unwanted. We hear stories of unthinkable murders in a Pakistani school, the shooting of a 12 year old holding a toy gun in Cleveland by police officers, and police officers ruthlessly killed as they sat in their car simply doing their jobs in New York City. We hear of friends battling cancer and know of others for whom Christmas is not very celebrative because they've lost someone and are facing the holidays again without them. We know of others who have lost jobs this month or are grieving some other kind of loss. Life is not very tidy, is it?

It's that life--our life--the babe in the manger has entered in and seeks to be born in us today. And maybe that's why you're here. Maybe in the midst of all the bad news to which we are all exposed, we long for some angelic good news, lasting news of great joy for all the people, for peace on earth, good will toward all people. We long for meaning and joy and love, the likes of which we find in this little, vulnerable babe who would grow to teach and heal and preach good news to the poor, justice for the oppressed, mercy for the sinners.

When our son was born I read the story of a mother who was reflecting on her inexplicable love

for her new baby. She wrote of how deeply and powerfully attached she was to this child she carried within her for 9 months and how unexpected was the deep passion she felt for this little, vulnerable life lying in the crib. She watched him as he slept, pondering this: bent down, close to his face, breathing in as he exhaled, smelling the milking breath of her child. Peace. Utter peace and an indescribable joy!

I remember those feelings for our infant son as I did experienced the sharing of breath with him as he slept. Powerful. Passionate. Inexplicable, but very real.

I believe that's what the manger invites, that kind of passionate, powerful, inexplicable love for God who comes not to dominate or to force us to love God, but to come willingly, like humble, low-class field hands who have good news to share.

Maybe you're here because--like me--when the lights are turned out and the light is shared in this and countless sanctuaries around the world and the singing begins, there is something about the mystery in the experience that feeds your soul. Maybe for just a few moments, we all sense the invitation to come to the manger, to bend down and love the vulnerable One. And in that bending down and adoring, there is a deep peace and calm present, the kind of peace for which we all long.