

The Nativity of our Lord
Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20
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David H. Teschner

My father's parents didn't have great riches, but they had a second home on Cape Cod. My brothers and I loved to go there because there was a pond behind the house where we could fish. One weekend our parents wanted a few days to themselves so Grandma and Grandpa took us grandchildren to the Cape. As always we were excited to go. When we arrived, there was already a car in the driveway. In fact, there was another family in the house. My grandparents had forgotten they had rented the house to this family for the weekend. Instead of going back to their year-round home just outside of Boston, they decided we'd spend the night in the garage. My grandmother prepared food on a hot plate and we slept on the car seats. To top it off, I remember it being too cold and rainy to fish. It was a miserable weekend, one a young boy never forgets.

Similarly, Mary and Joseph never imagined their firstborn son would be born in a space reserved for animals. Three times in Luke's gospel story of Jesus' birth, we hear of the manger where the child is laid shortly after his birth. Whereas the cross is the predominant symbol at the end of Jesus' life, the manger is the predominant symbol in Luke's gospel at the beginning of Jesus' life. Both the cross and the manger are surprising symbols for one promised to be Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, Savior, Messiah and Lord. Imagine the shepherd's surprise at the appearance of angels in the night sky and their good news of great joy for all the people only to finally hear that they'll find this great one in an animal's feeding trough. They'll know they found the right child precisely because he's the only one lying in a manger.

The manger and the cross have much in common. They're both simply and crudely made – rough hewn. They both serve unsavory purposes for human beings; one feeds animals; the other tortures people. They're both located away from home and hearth. Mangers stay outside a family's living space, and crosses are outside the city walls.

Manger and cross as signs and symbols associated with Jesus, however displeasing to our sensibilities, are crucially important to Luke's gospel. Jesus comes from undistinguished parents, is born out of wedlock, in substandard conditions, lives with little or no worldly belongings and dies in disgrace. For Luke, the shepherds are the first to hear of the Messiah's birth because they represent an out-of-favor class of people. As one scholar said, "In Jesus' day, no one wanted their daughter to marry a shepherd."

According to Luke, not only is Jesus from the other side of the tracks, but so are the people he came to save. We have both glamorized and stylized the manger and, even more so, the cross to the point of forgetting how humiliating and utilitarian both were.

By introducing this passage with the names of high powered rulers such as Emperor Augustus and Quirinius, Luke is asking us to contrast worldly authority and regal privilege and lifestyle to that of Jesus, born in little Bethlehem, and placed in a feed bin in an outbuilding. What kind of power can this child possibly wield, if he survives infancy?

Luke's use of earthly symbols and his recollection of Jesus as a man for all the people, especially the downcast and downtrodden, helps to remind us what we are celebrating at Christmas. We're not celebrating our good fortune – nice homes, good paying jobs, presents under the tree and a big family meal with all the fixings. For these we should certainly be exceedingly grateful, for sure. But Jesus never promised us a certain standard of living. Jesus never promised us intact, harmonious families. Jesus never promised us stable governments, nor politicians who could come together to solve problems.

Jesus didn't promise to enhance our external circumstances in any way. He did ask us to improve other's circumstances, however, through generous sharing.

Jesus came at Christmas without any of life's nicer things so he could be for everyone, the richest and the poorest, the most educated and the least educated, the healthiest and the sickest, the successful and the unsuccessful.

Jesus brings what we all need and desire, regardless of our station or stature in life. Jesus brings the assurance that the God of the ever-expanding universe cares deeply about each and every one of us. Jesus brings the assurance that God hasn't forsaken us to our worldly and ungodly ways. The Christmas message is that in Jesus God inhabits human flesh with all its foibles, imperfections and limitations. In Jesus, God sleeps and cries in the darkest and dampest, least inhabitable places, such as a manger. In Jesus, God is also willing to suffer the cruelest of deaths. All this is to say that nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

The church's Christmas is a message for the heart and soul, which transcends our outward circumstances. Jesus saves us from the inside out. Christmas peace and love and joy are not determined by how adequate our external circumstances are this December. We are all poor in soul and spirit; our mangers are empty, until we ask not Father Christmas but Jesus and the Holy Spirit to visit us and leave us with gifts that cannot be purchased and cannot break, gifts that won't wear out or become outdated.

The Christmas event – heaven coming to earth and God in man – reminds us that at the heart of all matter and space is love.

The manger, our Christmas sign, comes from the French verb "to eat." At all other times, a manger holds food for animals, but tonight it holds the bread of life, which nourishes all humankind – "the body of Christ, the bread of heaven."

By coming into our world at all, and more so lying in a crude and lowly manger, God, in the infant Jesus, becomes one of us and one of the least of us at that. From now on God is not apart from us; no longer above us looking down with displeasure. God stoops way down low to raise us up. God descends to the ground floor to confer value on each and every one.

Our response to such love come down to accompany us right where we are must be love in return that is extended to all. As St. Paul so plainly put it, If we “have not love, we are mere noisy gongs or clanging symbols.” Dante said, “Love turns the stars and the planets.” We know love keeps the world habitable as well.

Both the manger and the cross are empty now. Jesus has outgrown one and outlived the other. Now we pray that this same Jesus will reside more and more in each of us and every other person. If that’s the case, there is absolutely nothing to fear, and on earth there will be peace and goodwill among all men, women and children. The essence of our faith at all times is to let more of Jesus, more of the Holy Spirit, more light live in us and infuse us. When we’re full of God, everything around us is brighter as well. So let us in this moment of silence, invite God to come and more fully inhabit our hearts and minds.

Maybe one day no one will have to sleep in a car or be born in a barn. Amen.