
A Manger Ministry

Luke 2:1-20

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery at Duke Chapel on December 24, 2012

“Sweet little Jesus boy, they made you be born in a manger, sweet little holy chil’, didn’t know who you was.” “Away in a manger, no crib for a bed, the little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head. The stars in the sky looked down where he lay, the little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay.” Born in a manger. That is no place for God, for Jesus, for a child to lie. Children have been in the news a lot recently and once again on this Christmas Eve, we turn our spiritual gaze and eyes of faith toward a child. But this is not any child because at the foot of a Bethlehem manger, we gather around the altar of heaven to worship the one who cradles the earth. What child is this?

A manger is a strange habitat for God. Isn’t it? But Luke seems mesmerized by the manger in a triune fashion. Three times he tells us about a child lying in the manger. One of those times an angel reports breaking news from the CNN newsroom of heaven and declares, “a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger” is a sign of the birth of a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. A child. A fragile, tender, little, soft baby wrapped with strips of cloth to keep his body straight and to ensure proper growth as was the custom (cf. Wisdom of Solomon 7:4). A common birth at first sight.

Born in a manger. Another child born in poor conditions without adequate resources. But this is not any manger; it is the Messiah’s manger—the locale for the birth of the Christ, the Lord. Not in the palace halls of Caesar Augustus who thought he was Lord. Not in the form that was expected of a mighty Messiah—a great powerful, political, military, charismatic, anointed leader. No. But under the surveillance of the vast Roman Empire that sought to police “all the world” and control its operation. In the midst of an imperial cult that strove to maintain an earthly kingdom, a different kingdom with a different King was born with a lowly manger as a throne. A surprising subversion of those who thought they were Lord—to see the Lord’s face in a child. To see before our very eyes, the divine embrace of a child in a manger. What do you see in a child?

The tragic events of the last week or so in Newtown, CT may reveal how in a certain manner human lives, but particularly children (and youth), are devalued in our society. Seen but perhaps not heard. Taught but not thought that they can teach us anything or offer us anything worthwhile. We don’t need young lives cut short by guns to show us this. There are little bodies trafficked. Small bodies and minds abused. Little lives not thriving due to lack of educational or economical resources and opportunities. Children, babies, trapped in the cage of poverty right here in Durham. What do you see in a child?

What do you hear from children? When they pray, children say all kinds of things. “Dear God, in school they told us what You do. Who does it when You are on vacation? Jane.” Or, “Dear God, Did you mean for the giraffe to look like that or was it an accident? Norma.” Kids. I hear my 6-year-old son, Zachary, say “best buddies forever?” while he gives me a thumbs up. A child, a baby.

The Lukan biblical camera for Christmas focuses our attention on a small, fragile, vulnerable, simple, humble, innocent child lying in a manger as the means of joy to the world. Unable to speak yet called the Word of God. “Why lies he in such mean estate where ox and ass are feeding?” “A feeding trough [for animals] served as a crib” for the Christ (Fred Craddock). Some say Jesus was basically born in a cave used as a livestock shelter. Sixteenth century Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther (I think you might have heard of him), preaches that God had “to creep into a stable where it was customary to house cattle” (Martin Luther). Imagine what it smelled like. God was earthy—a manger, shepherds in the fields,

flocks. Truth sprung out of the earth, a rose e'er blooming from tender stem hath sprung. God has God's feet grounded and rooted in the soil of humanity.

But just because God is earthy and begins an earthly ministry in a manger does not mean that God's mission is confined to it. God's mission transcends the manger, the anthropological and ecological. Yes, the good news first comes to the lowly shepherds keeping watch over their sheep. Yes, God takes up residence in a lowly manger but the message comes from on high. "The stable is bare but the glory of God floods the story"(Craddock). And the glory of God shines the beams of heaven on us from the light of scripture out of the mouths of the angel and heavenly hosts who praise God saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" God touches earth and heaven thus God's influence is cosmological as well, as the angels announce the birth of the Messiah. Though housed in the flesh of a child, snuggling in a manger as a bed, God is not unworthy of glory. But glory is grounded. Glory shines differently in God's kingdom. Glory is discovered in the face of God in Jesus Christ, his baby face. Glory is voiced through praise in heaven and peace on earth.

We find in the Christ-child, divinity and humanity wrapped in love. A marriage of heaven and earth sealed in a manger. When angels greet shepherds and heaven meets earth, it can be terrifying (v.9) and at the same, joy-filled (v.10) because an encounter with the Holy is not like having a cup of Joe Van Gogh coffee with a friend. To meet God in the manger is a mystery because baby Jesus is at once the "child of Mary, King of glory."(Lo How Rose E'er Blooming) "He lies 'mid the beasts of the stall, who is Maker and Lord of us all."(O Come to the Manger). Early Church Father, St. Augustine, in some of his Christmas sermons, preaches about the incarnation in such a beautiful manner.

"Maker of the sun, He is made under the sun. Disposer of all ages in the bosom of the Father, He consecrates this day in the womb of His mother; in Him He remains, from her He goes forth. Creator of heaven and earth, He was born on earth under heaven. Unspeakably wise, He is wisely speechless; filling the world, He lies in a manger; Ruler of the stars, He nurses at His mother's bosom. He is both great in the nature of God, and small in the form of a servant, but so that His greatness is not diminished by His smallness, nor His smallness overwhelmed by His greatness....He was received into the Virgin's womb, not confined therein." Or,

"He lies in a manger, but He holds the world...He is wrapped in swaddling clothes, but He gives us the garment of immortality...He finds no room in the inn, but He builds a temple for Himself in the hearts of those who believe."

If Augustine were here right now, I would say "Preach! Bro. Augustine, preach!" I think he could win a divinity school preaching contest. His rhetorical theopoetics or what I call a 'hymnic homiletic' is his way of reaching to express the inexpressible and name the unnamable. That God comes as a child on earth but transcends the heavens. That God became human but made humans. That God whom the heavens cannot contain is rocked in an earthly crib. Uncontainable, indescribable, an untamable, God-child. No wonder we sing "let all mortal flesh keep silence."

What can one really say when God was high but stooped low, became low to take us high, so that we can really have "high church"? What might we say when we sing "mild he lays his glory by, born that we no more may die, born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth"? What can we say in the face of a God who came down to raise us up? What might we say today as we come to see a child wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger? Might we join the 'praise and worship' team of the angelic heavenly hosts and say "Gloria in excelsis Deo!?" Glory to God in the highest.

What more can we say as we face the face of an incarnate God in baby Jesus, a child, and see God's loving embrace of humanity, and in particular, innocent children? God could have come as anything or anyone—a Duke basketball player or even Coach K. But God willingly humbled himself to become a little, itty, bitty baby, away in a manger, a feedbox for animals. Yet, Mary "gave milk to our Bread" (St. Augustine). That is,

that in that feedbox for animals the Christ-child becomes spiritual food for us, bread for the world. This is none other than a spiritual sustainability possibility, not Christian cannibalism, but sheer joyous communion. “Lord of lords, in human vesture, in the body and the blood; he will give to all the faithful his own self for heavenly food” (Let All Mortal Flesh). In Bethlehem, which literally means “the house of bread,” the Bread of Life is born. Christ feeds our souls at the Christmas manger today.

This might be called a theology from below, a theology from the view of a manger, a theology through the eyes of a child. God-in-the-flesh feeds us and as a child, loves us and leads us. The child of the manger reveals a humble, vulnerable, and innocent God. The Christ-child lies in a manger, and eventually will lay down his life, not fighting against us, but for us, loving us. His only weapon is the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. God comes unarmed, wielding nothing but unconditional, selfless love. No weapons of mass destruction. No semi-automatic weapons or other guns. Only armed with a love that will not let us go, bestowing everlasting baby kisses through the caress of a child. This child does not coerce us into reciprocal love but reveals God’s deep desire to be with us so much so that divinity is wrapped in swaddling humanity. “Love was born at Christmas”(Love Came Down at Christmas). And as we kneel at this baby’s bedside we see the one who meets our deepest longing for love—a Christ-child, the one who leads us gently into eternal communion with God.

Through love, this child leads us along not to a kingdom under gun, but a kingdom under God, a God-child. “A little child shall lead them”(Isa 11:6), leads us in a godly grassroots manner from the manger. Divine power in human weakness. Heaven on earth through a child. And as this child leads us we recognize that everlasting would have been our misery but grace and mercy are now our song.

As this Christ-child ministers from a manger, there’s a sense that all children, the innocent and the vulnerable, matter. They are to be respected, loved, and protected. They are in fact God’s favorites so much so that God became one. This one “born a child, yet a King” who reigns from a manger calls us to care for and to serve the lowly, the poor, and the marginal, and clothe them with love. Through a child’s eye, something small and insignificant like a manger can produce miracles. We are here because of a miracle 2000 years ago when God was birthed into the world as a little baby boy lying in a manger. That miracle, that manger, mesmerizes us, and leads us to say like Jesus “let the children come”(Mark 10:13-16).

“Bless all the dear children in thy tender care”(Away in Manger). That has real meaning in light of the recent events, where hope seemingly died, creating an uncertain future. But Christmas resounds with angelic confidence in a child who is Hope “when worlds crash and dreams whiten into ash”(Howard Thurman). What child is this? A child held by his mother Mary yet holding the whole world in his hands. What child is this? “This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing; haste, haste to bring him laud”(What Child is This). Kneel at the altar of heaven by a manger of the earth to commune with God through a child. “Come, adore on bended knee” sweet little Jesus boy.

I’m so glad to see you on the other side of this past Friday’s prediction of the end of the world. And so since you’re here “O come let us adore him.” What child is this? He is Christ, the Lord, a Messiah in a manger.