

Introduction:

- A. The past three months we've worked hard at studying the Scriptures on Sunday mornings. I know I pushed harder into the book of James than I ever had before, and James pushed his way into my often stubborn heart. The next couple of Sundays will be different. Simple, though I hope just as valuable. And because stories speak to me I'll tell a couple stories that I think of every Christmas.
- B. A couple weeks ago Anne explored the phrase from John 1, "*The Word became flesh.*" Today we look at a line from Luke 2:12. You've heard the text and you remember the angel's word to the shepherds, "*I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.*" Then this: "***This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.***" I'm sure those instructions helped the shepherds find the baby Jesus, but in the Bible signs don't just direct traffic. Signs in the Bible poke you in the ribs and whisper, "*Do you get it?*" In the Bible signs are signals.
- C. I suppose, like all newborns, this baby spent most of his time in his parents' arms, but the sign was the baby, the Lord anointed by God as our King, lying in a rough-hewn barn rack full of straw normally nuzzled by livestock. When the shepherds saw it they would not only know for certain that they had indeed seen the Messiah but that they were seeing something more. They were seeing some of what the Messiah *means*.
- D. Of course, it is one of those what's-wrong-with-this-picture situations. One of my favorite Christmas songs that no one remembers begins like this:

How should a King come?

Even a child knows the answer of course,

In a coach of gold with a pure white horse.

In the beautiful city in the prime of the day,

And the trumpets should cry

and the crowds make way.

*And the flags fly high in the morning sun,
And the people all cheer for the sovereign one.
And everyone knows that's the way that it's done.*

That's the way that a King should come. [Jimmy Owens]

- E. We read of the taxation that drove Joseph and Mary from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem, and of “no room in the inn,” and the baby in a manger—a *manger* of all things!—and our response is, *That's not what should happen*. We shake our heads and think, *What kind of world is this where the Lord himself finds no welcome?* The world would surely fail Jesus miserably but that is not what happened here. No one was at fault here. The angel didn't conclude his stunning good news with a shining shrug, “*Unfortunately, you'll find the baby in a manger.*” The Lord wanted to come incognito. That Jesus was laid in a manger is a good thing! That setting is more wondrous and wise than the star that caught the eye of the wise men. It is a more suitable birthplace for this king that the great white temple glistening above Jerusalem. It is a *sign*—a poke in the ribs and the whispered question, ***What kind of king chooses to be presented in the hay rack of a barn?***

Illus.: There was no question he loved her. He was absolutely bedazzled by her. Surprising, really, because she was plain, maybe even... well, (to someone else perhaps) disappointing. But then, he himself was a poor man who didn't have even two coins to rub together. He wasn't especially handsome, either. But he was good... a good and godly man, and he swept her off her feet, and won her heart. What makes that ordinary story extraordinary is the rest of the story.

The story—told by Soren Kierkegaard—actually begins, “*Suppose there was a king who loved a humble maiden.*” He was a great king and he could have whatever he wanted. Every statesman feared his wrath, every foreign state trembled before his power; they would have all sent ambassadors to the wedding.

He realized that if he asked his courtiers they would say, “*Your majesty is about to confer a favor upon the maiden for which she can never be sufficiently grateful her whole life long.*” That was

the problem! Even if she wanted to come with him, he would never know for certain if she would have loved him for himself. So he wrestled with his troubled thoughts alone. Finally he decided. If she could not come up to his high station and be sure to love him freely, he must descend to hers. And he must descend stripped of his royal power and wealth, for only then would he know if his beloved loved him freely, as equals. So he laid aside all his power and privileges, and came to her as her equal, to win her love.¹

I. THE BABY JESUS, “WRAPPED IN CLOTHS AND LYING IN A MANGER,” IS A SIGN THAT GOD IDENTIFIES WITH US AND LOVES US

- A. He was only a few hours old, cocooned tightly in cloths. What is he... 6 lbs. 5 oz.? 8 lbs. 1 oz.? 21 inches or 19, perhaps? *Look at that head of hair! I think he has his mother's eyes.* So wondrously tiny, wrapped up tightly for a sense of security, just like you were, and your babies. He knew no more lying there than your baby knew. He could do no more than you could do on the day of your birth. As a man, Jesus stood apart from the rest of us by his sinlessness, his wisdom and works but in the manger he was just like us.
- B. Christ chose not only to identify with us in our humanity but also in our weakness and poverty. It would have been an easy thing for the Sovereign Lord to reserve a room in Bethlehem for the birth of the Messiah but he chose the manger, a signal that God favored the humbled. That God would be at home among the helpless, overtaxed, and displaced. That in an empire where Ceasar Augustus could tax the whole world, the Messiah of God would be born in the heart of poverty and humility.
- C. It isn't just that Jesus honored the poor by visiting them, the way a celebrity visits the slums, but that he showed us that inner poverty and weakness are the very identity of royalty in God's kingdom. Luke wrote how Jesus said, “*Blessed are you who are poor,*” Jesus said, “*for yours is the kingdom of God.*” The rich and powerful have no chance of entering unless grace can somehow reduce them to the size of thread. The bluebloods of God's kingdom are the

servants of all. When someone asked Jesus who was greatest in the kingdom of heaven he gathered up a child and said, “*Whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*” In the manger, Jesus was a tiny, hours-old child, as humble as a person can get this side of death. The thing a child has in common with the poor and powerless is that they’re small, and only the small are great in God’s kingdom. They’re the only ones who can maneuver in through the doorways of grace. Through Jesus, earth’s humblest servants, *the royal order of the manger*, will be given heaven’s richest crowns.

The meaning of the manger’s sign is spelled out in **Phil 2:6-8....**

Jesus’ birth is the first public signal of God’s humility. The great and glorious Son of God in the most extraordinary of all his creative acts, “*made himself nothing*”—status-less—“*by taking the very nature of a servant.*” He made himself the one and only human being who always bends all his love and energy to the good of others. A servant through and through. The immense God reduced to a human being; a baby, no less; and lower yet—“*lying in a manger.*” Lower yet: willing to die in order to serve. And lower yet: to die in the shame, suffering and rejection of the cross. And all that lay hidden in the sign of the manger.

II. THE BABY JESUS, “WRAPPED IN CLOTHS AND LYING IN A MANGER,” IS A SIGN THAT THE LORD WILL STOOP LOW TO SAVE US

A. Illus.: One of my favorite Christmas stories in disguise comes from that old infidel, Mark Twain, from his book, *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*. It tells the adventures of a very ordinary man from the 19th century transported back to the medieval world of King Arthur. At one point he convinces King Arthur to dress like a peasant and take a journey through his kingdom.

They happen upon a rundown hut, deady quiet. When they enter they see a woman near death in the corner and when they get close to give her a drink of water they realize that she has deadly smallpox—and that they are in desperate danger. But the king won’t leave. And when the

mother asks him to go into the loft, he goes, finding the dead father on the way. This is what happens next:

“There was a slight noise from the direction of the dim corner where the ladder was. It was the king descending. I could see that he was bearing something in one arm, and assisting himself with the other. He came forward into the light; upon his breast lay a slender girl of fifteen. She was but half conscious; she was dying of smallpox.

“Here was heroism at its last and loftiest possibility, its utmost summit; this was challenging death in the open field unarmed, with all the odds against the challenger, nor reward set upon the contest, and no admiring world in silks and cloth-of-gold to gaze and applaud; and yet the king’s bearing was as serenely brave as it had always been in those cheaper contests where knight meets knight in equal fight and clothed in protecting steel. He was great now; sublimely great. The rude statues of his ancestors in his palace should have an addition—I would see to that; and it would not be a mailed king killing a giant or a dragon, like the rest. It would be a king in commoner’s garb bearing death in his arms.” [#2703]

That’s the Christmas story: *“A king in commoner’s garb bearing death in his arms.”*

- B. The Son of God, Christ the Lord, “made himself nothing.” He not only took on human nature but *“the very nature of a servant”*—the lowest rung on humanity’s social ladder. But by being born a servant at heart, signified by his birth in a manger, he was a better, nobler person than all the rest of us. He was swaddled tightly in our humanity without ever being ruined by our inborn sinfulness so that he might serve us by dying in our place. People without Jesus are dead—the walking dead, the everlasting dead. Jesus was born so that he could die for us. And then *he* was born *again*, from the womb of the tomb to lead us, like a great pathfinder, to our home. The Lord, who was laid in a manger because there was no room anywhere else, and who warned his followers, *“Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”* This Lord

promised us, “*I go to prepare a place for you...*” No manger awaits you. There will be no problem with finding your place in our home city, the New Jerusalem, because we are of the house and lineage of Jesus, who said, “*and I will come again take you to be with me.*”

Conclusion

You are the poor, plain heart-throb of the great Prince. It is our very lowliness—our poverty and weakness—that draws him to us, for he has the nature of a servant, and we certainly need God to serve us with his life.

You are the dying child carried in the arms of the King. He came to take up your death into his body so that you might live now and forever. Repent of your sin, and rest your trust in Jesus promise to save you and to bring you with him into the kingdom of God.

“This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

ⁱ *Philosophical Fragments*, Chapter 2: The God as Teacher and Saviour: An Essay of the Imagination; <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=2512&C=2380>