

In a Stable

Luke 2:1-20

Bible Mission USA

Sermon Archive

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Dr. Paul T. Eckel

*“A Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.
This will be a sign to you:
You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”*
(Luke 2:11-12)

It was our first Pilgrimage to the Holy Land back in 1960. Our guide took us to an ancient inn about a thousand years old.

The Palestinians in the local area called it the Khan of Sultan Zahir. ‘Khan’ means a rest house or inn.

It was a two-story affair built in a U-shape. Upstairs there were small rooms where travelers could stay. Below, behind heavy wooden doors, were stables for the animals.

This was very much like the Bethlehem inn where Mary and Joseph lodged that first Christmas.

When the couple learned there were no rooms available upstairs where people lodged, the inn-keeper motioned below and told the couple they could bed down in the stable if they wished.

We went into the stable. What can I say? The smell confirmed, it was a stable sure enough! You may own an attractive crèche scene. Remember that the real thing was not at all attractive.

An inn of this kind was built of stone. The walls were clammy and the air musty. A donkey at the far end tossed a careless glance our way, then went back to munching. A single light bulb hung from a

cord throwing an eerie glow over the dank and smelly place.

Along the back wall was a hollowed out stone ledge. This was the manger. It was hard and crude, but at least it was up off the dirty ground.

Everyone in our group spoke softly, almost reverently, as one might do in church. Finally our guide said, “It was in a stable very much like this that our Lord was born.”

But why? Why a stable? What are we to learn from Christ’s coming to us – in a stable?

Unexpected Breakthroughs

Truth be told, if we were writing this story we’d probably not have started it out in a barn. After all God’s glory and a smelly stable don’t seem to go together in our minds. It seems incongruous, unexpected. And yet...

In what we call our ‘real lives’ there are lots of things that don’t seem to go together, seem incongruous. Even so there are unexpected breakthroughs. This for one.

The old and reliable National Biscuit Company did not start the frozen cake revolution. Sara Lee a

small baker in Chicago led that breakthrough.

It wasn’t Bond or Wonder who began the revolution in quality bread. It was a little unknown bakery in Norwalk, Connecticut called Pepperidge Farms.

In the social arena other breakthroughs have also occurred. Fifty years ago during our national struggle with Civil Rights and Race Relations, well-known institutions made little impact.

In the end it was the unexpected shuffling of the feet of the oppressed that aroused the conscience of a nation.

The church has also had unexpected breakthroughs. In the past decades many mainline churches seemed to have lost their vitality and appeal.

That’s when spiritual energy seemed to skirt long established denominations, settling instead on Independent churches which continue to flourish.

Unexpected breakthroughs keep happening.

So it does not seem quite so strange to me anymore that the story of Christ’s coming to us should all begin in an unexpected

stable! Jesus, the Son of God, came down to us among brute animals and simple people!

The Underside of Life

‘Down’ is the right word. We call Christmas a ‘*High Holy Day.*’ We hear angels praising God as “*the Most High.*”

But there was nothing ‘high’ about the way Jesus came to us. He wasn’t upstairs among the paying guests. He was down below, where animals behave like animals and the poor huddle.

And so our learnings about a stable continue. Jesus meets us in the raw underside of life. He often makes himself known in the hardships of a stranger, in the poverty of a needy family you try to help, in the wounds of the diseased you hardly know how to help.

In his humility Jesus lives among us to support the unsupported, to company with the people most don’t want to bother with, to care about those who are often overlooked.

We admire the humility of Jesus *at a distance.* Close up, however, it’s often a different story. The way Jesus relates seems foreign and frightening.

Perhaps this is why we try to domesticate the holy. We may sing about the ‘Old Rugged Cross,’ but we prefer our crosses polished and bejeweled.

Jesus’ followers were rough laboring men, unlettered and unwashed. We might have trouble welcoming them in our pew. We’d prefer the apostles staying up there in stained glass windows.

Christ keeps coming to us in a stable, in the painful underside of life. He understands quite personally the wretched conditions in which many must live. Part of the meaning of Christmas today is learning to reach out to others as Jesus did.

You are doing some of that here at Northminster with cookies you bake, and bells you ring, and Joy Gifts you offer.

Undertaking for Others

Clearly, the stable is not a gimmick. It is not there to ‘quaint up’ the scenery of Christmas. The stable teaches us that Jesus’ birth down-below-in-the-foul-place is God’s way of loving. For Christ, love is always a personal thing.

A woman was applying for a job and had to fill out a form. One of the questions stumped her. “In

case of emergency,” it read, “who should we notify?” She was confused.

“I don’t understand the question,” she told the manager. He said, “Well, if you have an accident on the job, who do you want us to call?”

She said, “The nearest human being, of course!”

Can’t you just hear Jesus applauding? Wherever the Spirit of Christ takes hold, people start caring about other people who are hurting. Christmas seems to bring out the best in us, if only to help those who find Christmas to be the worst.

Christmas is flooded with dark memories for some, bare cupboards, and waning hope. For them, depression and heartache and loneliness are persistent Christmas companions.

In one of my churches we recognized this and set up a special telephone line called “Christmas Hot Line for the Hurting.” We advertised it just this way in the local newspaper.

Before the Christmas Eve service that year I took my turn for an hour at the phone. A teenager rang the hot line number

and the first words out of his mouth were, “I hate Christmas Eve!” I stayed on the phone with him for over half an hour.

At least he found someone to talk with that evening. At least he heard some ‘good news’ that night. Christmas is a mixture of pain and hope.

Underway with Jesus

It’s even that way for us today. We are about to celebrate the Lord’s Supper on this Christmas Sunday.

But how does Communion with its focus on the cross relate to Christmas with its image of Jesus in a manger?

I served as an Interim Pastor of a church in Orlando some years ago. They had ‘A Time With Children’ as part of their Worship Service.

The kids settled down on the chancel steps. As part of the story the teacher held up a wooden cross in one hand and a miniature manger in the other.

She asked the kids if they could think of any connection between these two familiar objects. A young girl answered softly, “They both held Jesus.”

All of us in the congregation that Sunday sat in stunned silence. We were awed by this little girl's perceptive answer.

The Manger and the Cross both held Jesus. One held Jesus to start His life; the other held Jesus to start *our* lives.