

“This Will Be a Sign For You”
Luke 2:1-20
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“In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3All went to their own towns to be registered. 4Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,
14 ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

What are the signs you normally look for to know that God is with you? I know what our culture would say. Folks post pictures of themselves online, sometimes in jest, laying on the beach or holding a pumpkin spice latte with “#blessed” as the caption. It’s meant to be silly, but it touches on an underlying message that pervades American society: You will know that God is with you, that you are “blessed,” if everything is going well. You will know you are blessed because you got that promotion you wanted. You will know God is with you because your bank account says you’ve got some cushion. You will know you have divine favor because that CT scan came back clean. “This will be a sign for you that God is on your side,” our culture says: “you’ll see your life working out exactly as you planned.”

But in our text this evening, the angel says something outrageous and strange to the shepherds about how they will know they are really encountering God made flesh: “This will be a

sign for you.” declares the angel, “you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and *lying in a manger.*”

I find it strange that a *manger* would be the sign to the shepherds that they were encountering the God who came to earth. Because, if you think about it, the manger itself is a sign that just about everything has gone wrong. This newborn baby is resting in a manger, a fancy word for a food trough, instead of a safe, warm crib for sleeping. That food trough is in some sort of stable not made for human dwelling, because there is no room for Jesus’ family at the inn. Mary and Joseph weren’t even supposed to be looking for an inn for Mary to give birth in the first place because I’m sure they imagined they would get back to Nazareth in time for her to go into labor. And, actually, they weren’t even supposed to be on long, harrowing trip to Bethlehem, but the emperor at the time wanted to greedily count up all his power and resources, probably to figure out how to spread his empire. So Joseph was forced to take a very pregnant Mary on a long hard journey at the worst possible time in her pregnancy. And I’m sure it wasn’t part of the grand plan this young couple had for their lives for Mary to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit before the wedding with Joseph had taken place. In a deeply patriarchal society, her premarital pregnancy would have been reason for her village to stone her to death. The more you sit with this story, the more you realize that everything about the situation into which Jesus was born is dripping with complications and messiness and scandal.

Complications and messiness and scandal. Maybe those words put their finger on something in your own story. The relationship you thought was going to be forever that ended in

your broken heart. That issue at your workplace that quickly got messy because, y'know, *humans* were involved. The family gathering everyone had been looking forward to that ended with sharp words and slammed doors. The CT scan that did not come back clean, but instead changed the trajectory of your whole life. All these situations tend to have one thing in common - they have a way of slowly convincing us that the messiness of our own lives has excluded us from God's presence and blessing. Everything has gone wrong, and the bill of goods our culture sold us says that we are past the point of God's love.

That's what makes the *manger* in this story such a gripping detail. That manger, and every layer of this story that led Mary and Joseph to place Jesus inside of it, was a signal that *nothing* had gone according to plan. And the Gospel-writer Luke won't let us look away from that manger, that symbol of complete human failure. The manger is mentioned three times in tonight's text, not the least of which is when the angels are telling the shepherds that the baby lying *in the manger will be a sign to them* that they are meeting God incarnate. And so, you could paraphrase the angel's announcement to the shepherds like this: "This will be a sign that you are meeting God made flesh - you'll find this God right in the middle of that messy, inconvenient, and scandalous situation where everything has gone wrong and you had convinced yourself that God could never find you."

And this, friends, is the good news of great joy for all people: God has come. And this will be a sign to you: you'll know you have really found this God when you see God showing up right in the middle of that dysfunctional, strange, messy place where you had given up hope. Perhaps you walked in here tonight doing

your best to be shiny and put together - trying to hide that failure, that embarrassment, that complication, that *manger* in your life that you are sure excludes you from God's presence and blessing. Tonight, I'm here to tell you that no amount of mess or failure or chaos can separate you from the love of God because Jesus Christ was *born* into that messy place. Jesus was *born* into complicated places just like that broken relationship, like that dysfunctional situation at your job, like that diagnosis that has changed the trajectory of your life, like that family yelling-match that took over the holiday dinner. It is in those mangers of our lives that God first took on flesh. The God we find in Scripture is not scandalized by our scandal. You don't need to dress up, clean up, or straighten up for God to find you. For God's presence in a manger, that symbol of our frailty and messiness, is a promise that God's love will stop at nothing to bring you home.

So, that "manger" in your life, where you stopped looking for God to show up a long time ago - look again. Follow the shepherds from the night-covered fields to that place you would least expect to find in your life. Rejoice and celebrate with those shepherds that you are loved with such depth and passion that this God would be born as a fragile baby into our most forlorn and lonely places. And, like Mary, begin to ponder in your heart that this good news is for *you*. Amen.