



Pastor Gwen's Message
Christmas Eve
"The Manger Scene"
December 24, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.
AMEN

Back in the late 1990, early 2000's our home congregation, St Olaf in Rubicon, WI had a tradition of a live Christmas nativity. Our church was in an open field, with a horse farmer as a neighbor. The farmer was kind enough to lend us his barn for our reenactment of the birth of Jesus.

Our evening started in the sanctuary where a young adult in our congregation, wearing Rodney's old dress blues army uniform, portrayed emperor Augustus, declaring that all should return to our hometowns and be registered. And so, we began our trek to Barn Bethlehem.

Along the path there were lanterns to light the way and beggars, confirmation students, dressed in shabby garments with pails to collect coins from the travelers. When we entered the barn there were stations set up with forms to fill out to register. The tax collector then assigned an amount for each family to pay. After pretend payment was made, we went and sat on bales of hay that were set in rows around the barn.

People continued to enter as a cow, goats, several llamas, chickens, and a lamb were walking freely around in the barn. The Sunday school class donned in angel attire was seated in the haymow above the platform that was set up. When all were registered, a very pregnant Mary, pillow molded to her middle, came in riding a very large donkey with a tired Joseph leading the animal. Joseph knocked on the door

after he helped Mary on the stage. An innkeeper made it known that there was no room in the inn.

The couple then made their way to the other end of the stage where a few animals were laying. In the middle of the platform was a feeding trough. A manger if you will. Soon Mary lost her pillow and held in her arms the youngest member of the congregation. The baby was born. And one year in particular, a rooster crowed at just the right moment, and all was silent. Mary laid the little one in the feeding manger. Music resounded for this happy occasion, that a baby had been born. A baby that was the Messiah, God's only Son, our Lord. The night ended as we sang praises to our newborn King, and it felt like Joy to the World could be heard for miles. It was a surreal experience that I will never forget, a very powerful reenactment of the manger scene we have all come to know and love.

Our nativity scene depicted in the Gospel of Luke is the best we have, to give us an idea of what happened that night so long ago. The best feel for what the manger scene was really like. I hope you too have had meaningful experiences with the manger and the birth of Jesus, whether in your home, another church, a neighbor's yard or possibly a live nativity you have attended in the past.

The manger scene is an important one. If you can think with me for a few minutes about what it might have looked like. One thing we notice is that Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the animals present, they are all looking in the same direction. They are all looking at the manger, at the baby lying in the feed trough. All attention is on the little boy just born in that barn. All eyes are on Jesus.

Did you ever wonder what Joseph was thinking about as he looks down at this infant? He probably is recalling what the angel had told him earlier in a dream, that this child was not conceived from any man, but from the Holy Spirit. God is physically the father of the baby, not Joseph. Joseph is probably thinking about his responsibilities of taking care of this holy child. Joseph is probably remembering that the angel had told him that this child should be named Jesus, because he would save his people from their sins. As Joseph looks into that manger, I am sure that he had some questions, like, "How in the world am I supposed to be the stepfather to the son of God? And how on earth is this baby going to take away sins? How is this all going to work?"

And then Mary. What is she thinking as she looked down at her newborn son? She is remembering what the angel Gabriel had said to her too. He told her that this baby would be called the Son of the Most High. God would someday give this child the throne of David. He was going to be a king and he would reign forever and ever. I am pretty sure Mary is thinking about what her cousin, Elizabeth had said to her, that she, Mary was blessed to be this mother of the Lord. And Mary looks down at

the manger, she probably had many questions too? How am I supposed to raise the Son of God? And when will he become a king? How will he reign forever since no one lives forever? How is that all going to work?

And we cannot neglect the shepherds who had just arrived from tending their flocks in the fields nearby. What are they thinking as they see this infant laying in a manger? They too are remembering what the angel had said to them, that this little infant is the Christ, the one that God has been talking about for thousands of years in the Scriptures. This little child is the Lord, Jehovah. He is the one who brings peace on earth. And there he is lying in the manger, just as the angel said he would be. But as those shepherds look at the child, I wonder if they had questions too, questions like: How can this little baby be the Christ? Wasn't the Christ supposed to be greater than this? Shouldn't the Lord be born in a palace and not in a stable? Why is it this way? How would he bring peace to their earth? How is this all going to work?

I am sure that there were lots of questions in the minds of all those present that night in the stable on the first Christmas Eve. One thing is missing though. YOU! You are missing from the scene. You see through the Word of God, through the eyes of faith and are transported to the manger scene two thousand years ago. Imagine what it would have been like to be there, literally go back in time and stand with Mary and Joseph and the shepherds in the barn in Bethlehem.

Would you want to see into that manger? How close would you get to baby Jesus? Would you greet Mary and Joseph as ordinary people? Would the shepherds seem rather rough around the edges? Would it be smelly around the animals? Would there be unfamiliar noises? But other than in our imaginations, we cannot go back. We cannot go back to innocence of the virgin birth, as we know the whole story. We know how things are going to work out.

We are Christians who know not just this beginning but also the rest of the story of Jesus. We know that this baby will grow up in the home of Mary and Joseph. We know that he will learn to be a carpenter. We know that he will someday preach to crowds that followed him. We know that not all people will believe him. We know that he will perform many miracles. We know that even his disciples will desert him. We know that he will hang on a cross and die. And most importantly, this infant child will grow up to raise from the dead and ascend into heaven and rule forever as King of all creation.

Wouldn't you like to go back to that manger scene and tell Mary, Joseph, and those shepherds the whole story. But I doubt that they would believe you. There are just

too many questions. But with all those questions in the manger scene, there is still an overwhelming sense of hope in the air.

It is a hope that is unshakeable. All present in the manger scene believe. They believe that Mary's son will be the Christ, whose kingdom will last forever. The shepherds hope that through this child God will bring peace to earth. The manger scene is truly a serenely quiet place. A humble place. A place of true hope. For in that manger, it is visible proof that God does keep his promises. God does love you and the world. God is so faithful, so loving, that he becomes an infant on Christmas Eve, lying in a feeding trough, for you and for me.

Truly it is a silent night, and a holy night. In the midst of this dark, chaotic world in Bethlehem, there in the stable, all is calm, and all is bright. With virgin mother and child. Here you see God as a holy infant, tender and mild, sleeping in heavenly peace. Here we have hope, a reason to rejoice, a place of peace.

And may this manger scene be for you more than just a nice seasonal decoration. May it be for you a reminder that the son of God has been born. On this night we celebrate God beginning the work of our salvation. And we pray:
O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray! Cast out our sin and enter in; Be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels and great glad tidings tell. Oh, come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel!

Amen and Merry Christmas!