

A Stable Place Sufficed

Luke 2:1-7

Fourth Sunday in Advent/ 20th December 2020

Luke wants us to know that after Jesus was born, he was placed in a manger. “And Mary 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” (Lk. 2:7). And if this doesn’t grab our attention the first time he tells us again; this time through the angel’s announcement to the shepherds: “This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger” (Lk. 2:12). And if we’re still not paying attention, we learn for a third time, “So [the shepherds] went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger” (Lk. 2:16). So, where was Jesus placed after he was born? In a *manger*.

And why does this matter? Because Luke wants his community, his church—*us*—to know something fundamental and radical about the life of this child and what he will embody and what we, too, are called to embody in the world. The manger is a focal point for Luke, and it becomes a surprising, even unsettling symbol for a savior—both for the early church and by extension for us.

It’s easy, perhaps, to miss this because Luke 2 is so well-known and well-worn, domesticated and tamed over the centuries that we’re not really sure why “shepherds quaked at the sight,” as the old carol sings. But Luke wants us to quake. He wants us to be “sore afraid,” as the King James Version says. Luke wants us to wake up and pay attention, be startled and amazed by the announcement that the savior sleeps in a manger in a stable.¹

Note, however, that Luke doesn’t begin the story by talking about a manger. Luke was a master storyteller. He begins with a decree made in Rome and the contrast built into these first seven verses of Luke 2 couldn’t be greater. “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus...,” Emperor of the Roman Empire, which was considered “all the world.” Augustus. But that was not really his name. His full name was Gaius Octavian Thurinus (27 BCE – 14 CE). Augustus was a title given after he became Emperor, meaning “the illustrious one,” it was also a religious title given to a priest. It was also a title given to someone who was worshipped as divine. Octavian was the adopted son of Julius Caesar (d. 44 BCE), who was considered a god, Divine (divus). This made Augustus a “son of god,” and after his death in 14 CE he was declared divine and worshipped as such throughout the Empire. Another title given to Augustus was *soter*, meaning “savior,” savior of the world. Augustus was also considered the bringer of joy, as well as the bringer of peace. Now if all this sounds like the same titles given to Jesus in Luke’s birth story—son of God, savior, bringer of joy and peace, lord—they are.² It’s intentional. Luke is making a bold, risky move here: he’s making a sharp contrast between the realm of Rome and the realm of the manger, the power of Caesar and the power of Christ, the ostentatious wealth of Octavian’s empire and the modest poverty of God’s empire.

Luke wants his community, his church to see that, “The Savior of the world is not the military victor whose legions bring peace through victory and terror but a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes. The Prince of Peace does not come with a sword but with healing hands.”³

The new-born child rules over an empire—a *kingdom of God*, as Luke and Matthew, Mark, and John described it, a *basileia tou theou*, which should really be translated as the *empire of God*—an empire where beggars, peasants, the sick and marginalized, where women and children become dignitaries. It's a ludicrous empire, a foolish-looking empire in which every expression of power is turned upside down.⁴

“And a particularly absurd symbol of power in this divine empire is a manger.”⁵ I'm grateful for theologian Wendy Farley's work on the symbol of the manger. “The initial appearance of the incarnation in a manger is so troubling,” she says, “except for children's Christmas pageants, it is relegated to theological oblivion.”⁶

We could, though, give Saint Francis (1181/2-1226) some credit as he is associated with the tradition of constructing nativity scenes with Jesus asleep in a manger or crèche surrounded by his parents, shepherds, animals, and magi. Francis celebrated the poverty of the Christ-child.⁷

At Christmas, we bring out our manger scenes, set them up in our homes and churches. The rest of the year they're stored away in the attic. And this is telling and speaks volumes about how far the church has moved away from Luke's message about the importance of the manger. Farley invites us to consider, “We do not wear tiny mangers around our necks or set them on our walls. We do not walk, consoled, under a manger as it radiates its message from the top of church towers: images of feeding, of natality, novelty, the joy of a birth, the proximity of a nursing woman.”⁸ It's an image of vulnerability, poverty, exile. The great revelation of Christianity, this ever-fresh and astonishing good news enters the world in a peasant's home and sleeps in a manger. Born in the backwater town of Bethlehem—*Beth-lehem*—meaning “house of bread,” born in the middle of nowhere on the edge of an empire, this savior rules and serves and feeds us from a feeding trough, as Farley puts it, from “an alternative universe of power.”

Can you see what Luke is doing? Do you see what he's up to, what he's trying to convey to us?

Bethlehem – House of Bread. Manger. Savior. You can see why the manger was viewed by the early church as foreshadowing the eucharist, where we are fed at the Lord's table. St. Chrysostom (d. 407), writing in the 4th century, encouraged his congregation to attend Mass on Christmas Day, where they could approach the altar as if they were going to the manger. “For if we approach with faith,” he said, “we shall surely behold him lying in a manger. His holy table will supply the place of a manger. For there will be spread the body of our Lord, not wrapped in swaddling clothes as then, but on all sides surrounded by his Holy Spirit.”⁹

“...and they laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn” (Lk. 1:7). Yes, that's that Luke wants us to know. A manger. And the reason why they place Jesus in a feeding trough for the animals was because there was no room in the rest of the house where everyone dwells and sleeps. “Inn” is an unfortunate translation here. In first-century Palestine, people lived in one part of a house, which often included a kind of guest room, known as the *kataluma*, translated as “inn,” and the animals were kept, at night, in the other part of the same house—and, so, not really a stable as we think of it. The point, subtle yet equally profound, is that the manger is the place apart from where people lived. The manger is the place where the

savior of the world is forced to sleep because we have a difficult time making room for this sort of savior.

But why is it so difficult to welcome this kind of savior? Maybe because it doesn't come naturally for us, it's counter-intuitive, it's not rational, it doesn't make any sense. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) once asked, "Who among us will celebrate Christmas correctly?" He answered his question by saying, "Whoever finally lays down all power, all honor, all reputation, all vanity, all arrogance, all individualism beside the manger; whoever remains lowly and lets God alone be high; whoever looks at the child in the manger and sees the glory of God precisely in his lowliness."¹⁰

But the truth is we're not really sure that we want to go that low. The truth is we really don't know how to receive this kind of savior. It's difficult for us to make space for him, to give him room. To return to Farley's earlier observation, can you imagine how the history of the church, indeed the history of the world, would have been different had our primary symbol been a manger instead of a cross. A provocative thought, I know. But, remember, the cross didn't become a Christian symbol for several centuries after Christ. And what if we kept the crèche in our sanctuaries year-round and out on the front lawn of our churches year-round? The manger: a symbol of humility and poverty, Jesus as "bread" who feeds God's people, the source of food and nourishment. Consider the church-as-manger, extending nourishment for our bodies, both physical and spiritual. Imagine the church-as-manger in service to the one who rules with compassion and binds up the wounds of God's people—all the while as another empire looks on us with fear and suspicion and refuses still to make room for him. For the empire of this child must *never, ever* be confused with the empires of this world.

That's what Luke is saying here. That's what Luke is trying to get us to hear.
It's as if Luke is saying:

*Hey, Augustus! Yo! Augustus! So-called "illustrious one."
Do you want to know how a true savior saves the world?
Look at that manger.
Look for the manger.*

That's why the angels were singing—then, now, and always.



*Nativity (c.1200), ceiling fresco in the crypt of the Münster in Basel, Switzerland
(Photo: K.E. Kovacs)*

¹ By “stable” we probably should not imagine a separate, free-standing structure or barn for animals. The cultural-historical work of Kenneth E. Bailey suggests that in Middle Eastern homes the place where the animals were kept at night was in close proximity to where people lived and slept. The manger or feeding trough was often an indentation in the floor. *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (IVP Academic, 2008). See also this helpful article in *The Presbyterian Outlook*. <https://pres-outlook.org/2006/12/the-manger-and-the-inn-a-middle-eastern-view-of-the-birth-story-of-jesus/>. While conscious of Bailey’s reading of the text, I have chosen to take a more symbolic approach. The sermon title is taken from a line in the poem “[A Christmas Carol](#)” by Christina Rossetti (1830-1894), published in 1872. Gustav Holst (1874-1934) set the poem to music in 1906, known today as the carol “In the Bleak Midwinter.”

² On the Roman imperial cult in the Gospel of Luke, see John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus’s Birth* (Harper One, 2009).

³ Wendy Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away: A Theology of Incarnation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 189.

⁴ Farley, 189.

⁵ Farley, 189.

⁶ Farley, 189.

⁷ See Paul Sebatier, *The Road to Assisi: The Essential Biography of St. Francis* (Paraclete Press, 2014).

⁸ Farley, 189

⁹ Cited in August Neander, *The Life of St. Chrysostom* (1845), from a preparatory sermon preached five days before the festival of Christmas in 387.

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *God Is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas*, Jana Riess, ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).