

Why would God send his Son to be born in a messy barn? It was no place for a king. But Jesus was no ordinary king. I believe the story of our Savior’s birth challenges us to live like Jesus because it reminds us that he came to a messy place because he came to save us messy people.

Let’s think about Jesus’ manger. I believe the manger is a sign of the kingdom of God and a sign of the ways of God. It’s a simple sign. At its most basic level the manger is first a sign to the shepherds so they would be sure that they found the right baby. [Check out verses 12 and 16] Would you agree that there aren’t too many babies lying around in mangers—now or then. But I believe it was more than that. I believe that the child in the manger is a sign of the way God does things: *God does big things in small ways.*

1) First, the manger is a sign to *the shepherds*, the poor and powerless in the world; that the Kingdom of God belongs to people like the shepherds. The fact that God chose to come into the world as one of the poor is a sign of solidarity with the poor. Just as the manger was a sign to the shepherds, the shepherds are a sign to us. Maybe you’ve heard some things about shepherds before...

- They were despised in first century society
- Their lifestyle made them ceremonially unclean for religious observance
- They weren’t too careful to distinguish between ‘mine’ and ‘thine’
- They were barred from giving evidence in court as a witness

It amazes me that the angels appear to them and not to the people in the Jerusalem temple. This is the greatest news in the history of the world! The Messiah has come! But God comes to a group of people who wouldn’t even be allowed in the temple, had the baby been born there. If the angels were looking for someone to tell today, I think they might go to the guys shooting baskets at the public park, or the people in line at the soup kitchen.

There were two groups of people who were not trusted to give testimony in first century Israel—shepherds and women. The first ones to be told of Jesus’ birth were the shepherds; the first ones to be told of his resurrection were the women. This teaches us something about how God works. The shepherds are a sign that God loves the outcast—those who society has no time for—and typically looks down on.

A song, titled, *The Cry of a Tiny Babe*, by Bruce Cockburn speaks to this societal divide...

*There are others who know about this miracle birth
The humblest of people catch a glimpse of their worth
For it isn't to the palace that the Christ child comes
But to shepherds and street people, hookers and bums
And the message is clear if you've got ears to hear
That forgiveness is given for your guilt and your fear
It's a Christmas gift you don't have to buy
There's a future shining in a baby's eyes.*

2) The second thing about the manger is that it is also a sign to *the parents of the child* who laid him in this feeding trough. By law, Mary didn't really have to go with Joseph to Bethlehem, but Joseph may have worried about her safety, because by law—pregnant and unmarried—she could be stoned. “No Room at the Inn” conjures up a variety of images in our minds. The usual scene is of a nice old innkeeper with no room, who would most likely have made room for the right price. Maybe he was holding out, hoping for a wealthy person to come along. But Mary and Joseph are poor. Later in Luke we see that they offer a poor person's offering at the temple when they present Jesus on the eighth day.

But there may be a more cruel way of seeing things: An innkeeper who says, “There's no room here *for your kind!*” From Nazareth, poor and pregnant. Had they sought a room with a distant relative in Joseph's ancestral hometown, that alone could have brought shame on the family name. Would they end up out on the street? Well, not exactly, but close to it. They found a stable, a shelter for

animals, a cave in the hillside, or maybe a courtyard behind the inn. We don't know for sure because the only real detail mentioned is *the manger*.

The King of eternity does not come as one of the rich and powerful, but as one of the last and the least. God works through poor and insignificant people to do amazing things. Mary sings when she greets Elizabeth in Luke chapter one:

*“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.”*

The King of all kings is not born in a palace, but in a stable. You see, Jesus' power is not like our power, or the power the world recognizes. Jesus' mother spoke without waffling or spinning the message. She spoke truth, as her son did.

3) The third thing is—and by now you must realize—the manger is a sign to *us*. We often want God to do things in big and spectacular ways, but we forget that God does big things in small ways. We look forward to his second coming in the same way that Jewish people looked for his first coming—we look for signs and we sing songs about the King coming in glory.

We're forgetting that God seems to do big things in a small way. There are some of us who want Christmas to be a big splash—like the Griswold's kind of holiday. But no matter how much sentimentality bubbles up around Christmas, no matter how much materialism tries to capture us, we cannot escape the fact that our Savior, the Savior of the world—God himself in human flesh—was laid in a feeding trough for his first cradle. So, you're using a hand-me-down cradle for your newborn because money is a little tight. Well Mary and Joseph didn't have so much as a cradle! They had a manger. And that's all they had.

Our Lord came as *“one of the least of these,”* as he later tells his disciples, urging them to minister in his name. The Lord of the universe gave up all his heavenly privilege and became a human baby—one of the poorest human

beings, a refugee, a Nazarene, an “illegitimate” child, if you will—for us. Remember that Jesus said: “*For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me... Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me*” (Matthew 25:35-40).

“*Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me,*” because while on earth he WAS “*one of the least of these.*” During this year’s celebration with all the “I wants” and the “What-did-you-gets,” the manger stands out as a sign to us. It’s very important to remember *why* God sent his Son to earth as a human: to rescue us from the power of sin and death, but it is also important to remember *how* he came. Like the Cross of Christ, the manger is a sign to us; that *God does big things in small ways.*

That’s a common theme throughout the Bible. God begins with one man and one woman; Israel is chosen because she is the smallest of the nations; Moses is a stuttering outcast of the royal court; Gideon has to whittle the army down to laughable proportions before God uses them to conquer their enemies; Elijah hears the voice of God not in the whirlwind, not in the earthquake, not in the storm, but in a still small voice. And then, to save all of creation God sends a helpless, homeless baby boy to a backwater province of the Roman Empire ruled by a paranoid despotic king.

Grant you, God does do *some big things in big ways*, but most often he works through the *small and insignificant*. That’s why he loves the poor so much—because they let him use them! He loves to work through ordinary people—people like you and me. We might have visions of grandeur, but God has visions of salvation and goodness and love through the small things we do.

Many years ago, I had a friend named Dave Brandt and Dave introduced me to the music of a unique singer/songwriter named Bruce Cockburn. I’d like to quote a few more lines from Bruce Cockburn’s song, *The Cry of a Tiny Babe*:

*Like a stone on the surface of a still river
driving the ripples on forever
Redemption rips through the surface of time
in the cry of a tiny babe.*

Come to the manger this Christmas Eve, but remember, when we come, it's not just a trip to the crude maternity ward in Bethlehem. It's a journey into the heart of God, where we will see a *God who does big things in small ways*.

God's grace, mercy, and peace be with you at Christmas—and throughout the coming New Year. Amen.