

Let us pray...*Our loving God, we come to you this Christmas Eve in wonder at the miracle of Jesus' birth. We are confused by how you would join us in such a way, but we are joyful beyond measure that you have come. We thank you for taking up our lost cause, throwing in your lot with us, and walking with us through life and death into your eternal love. Tonight, especially, we pray for those who are separated from loved ones, those who are traveling, those unable to travel, those at their place of work, and those who serve our military in distant lands. We ask your presence with those who are spending their first Christmas without a loved one or affected by tragedy, illness, accident or violence. Wondrous God, surround them with your caring friendship, your strong comfort, and the promise of eternal life. We ask that you enter ever deeper into our lives, taking control of more and more of our character and personality until we find Christ within us and Christ loving the world through us. We pray that you guide us today into your way of life where we faithfully serve you by serving others, where we freely give of ourselves for you, and where we worship you for all eternity. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Many years ago I visited a site outside of Bethlehem called the Shepherd's Cave. There I was asked to lead a Christmas-themed time of worship with my fellow Holy Land visitors. The trip was in January so the recent Christmas Eve sermon was fresh in my mind. Early Christian tradition says that Jesus was very likely born in a cave that served as a stable. Perhaps it was only a place under some overhanging rocks that was out of the weather. Caves often sheltered flocks of sheep for the night. The ground, whether deep in the cave or at the mouth of the cave, would be covered with sheep "exhaust."

We tend to romanticize this story. We've all seen the Christmas cards with pictures of Mary in flowing robes, gentle animals gazing lovingly down on the baby who is always blue-eyed, blonde-haired and, while supposedly newborn, has the look and weight of a six-month-old. That's not the way it was. Mary and Joseph were desperate to find someplace for her to give birth, and couldn't find a place. They ended up in an outdoor livestock area. Unclean, unkempt, unwelcome. Tradition—dating back to Justin Martyr in the second century—says it was probably some kind of cave. Smelly, damp, and cold. They had to use a feeding trough as a bassinette. The word "manger" is warm and fuzzy, but let's not romanticize it. A manger was a feeding trough for the animals. This was a desperate, deserted, mostly depressing scene.

The Bible tells us that Mary wrapped the baby in cloths. That was common for the day. Long strips of cloth were used to wrap the baby tight and keep their legs and arms straight and secure. The process is called swaddling. It tells us something of the lonely nature of Mary's motherhood that Luke records she was the one who wrapped up Jesus after His birth—there was no midwife or relative helping, which would have been the norm. Mary was very young and she was lonely. Yet from that darkness, we are given a picture of our redemption.

The cave that I visited near Bethlehem was tidy and clean to accommodate Holy Land visitors. But Mary and Joseph no doubt huddled under a smelly stone outcropping and placed Jesus in a manger for the cattle, perhaps one that shepherds had carved into the rock. Or maybe they laid him in a wooden feed box. As a modern American equivalent, we could think of Jesus born in an unheated garage, laid on a lawn chair or in a wheelbarrow.

Luke, the writer of this Gospel, reports that this is how God makes his appearance in the flesh. God makes a personal inspection of the Bethlehem slums. God is not ostentatious. He doesn't ask very much, and demands next to nothing. Only a manger is available. So God, always resourceful, uses that.

The circumstances of Jesus' birth foreshadow the story of the rest of his life. He's a guest, with us for a little while as he travels through life, and he doesn't have a place to call his own. Later in Luke's gospel Jesus says, "*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.*" Could be that when Jesus said that, he was remembering what his parents told him about his birth. There was no place in the guest house. He had to take what was *leftover*—a feeding trough for a basinet. From the beginning of his life Jesus has to settle for *leftovers*. Someone else gets the newest thing, clean and up to date. Jesus gets it after it's worn out, broken, or needs too much work to justify repairing it.

We Christians sometimes give Jesus our *leftovers*. Leftover time—maybe reading a couple lines of the Bible before we fall asleep. Phillip Yancey calls them "Bible nuggets" as though we only want a little bite at a time, not a full meal. At the end of the day when all our conversations have ended, every decision made, all our business transacted, we give Jesus a moment of what's left and say, "Hey Jesus, can you do something with that?"

We give Jesus our *leftover* home furnishings. We get a stain on the couch and say, "I think the church youth group could use this couch in their meeting room." Whether it's because we changed the color scheme of the living room and now the couch looks awful, or whether we're seduced into buying a new one because of an ad that we saw, we can no longer live with the old one.

We give Jesus our *leftover* health. We think we own ourselves, so we abuse our bodies and minds and then look to Jesus for an instant miracle and complain if we don't get that miracle—instantly.

We give Jesus our *leftover* money. We take out huge mortgages for houses, loans for cars, boats, and vacations, and we purchase the newest playthings. Then we offer Jesus a little of what's left in our bank account, and he should be grateful.

We give Jesus our *leftover* justice, after our personal rights have been secured and our financial well-being made certain. Once we are warm, well-fed, and thoroughly comfortable, then we might consider justice for those less fortunate.

And, of course, Jesus gets our *leftovers* in worship. We'll attend on the Sundays that nothing else is going on—and if we haven't stayed out too late the night before.

We give Jesus our *leftovers* at Christmas. When we're exhausted, or near exhaustion, from all the traditions of the season and family festivities, we might get around to a brief time of genuine worship offered to the Word made flesh; but then, we might not.

From the beginning of his life to the end, Jesus gets the *leftovers*. But what amazes me is that from the beginning to the end, **Jesus uses our leftovers**. Remember how he fed the crowds in Galilee with one boy's lunch and sent his disciples around with baskets to gather up the *leftovers*? He does that with our lives too. One miracle from Jesus; and even *leftovers* are more than enough. Jesus picks up the *leftovers* we won't be using, our throwaways, and he multiplies his miracles for any who will warmly receive him.

I am all too familiar with how this works. God took a fatherless boy, a middle child, a *leftover*, if you will, who was too shy to speak to a group of people or sing in front of people, even though others told him that he had a good singing voice. Then along the way God plainly told him that he wanted him to become a pastor and a preacher. Whenever he sang he was to sing praises to the Lord. He was to answer God's call so that God could give him all the good gifts that he never had before. He was to serve God his whole life long.

I am the boy. I was the *leftover* in which God saw a trace of faith and blew his Spirit upon the dying coals of my flickering faith until it began to burn like a fire within me. These sort of things don't come about by virtue of our willpower, or even because of our faith, but only because God is so good to us. God picks up the debris that we have scattered around like candy wrappers tossed onto the sidewalk and uses whatever is at hand.

When we think of our Lord Jesus today, of his coming into the world and into our lives, we can't assume he will only enter the clean swept, neatly arranged, tidiest rooms of our homes and lives. Our Lord Jesus shows up at the times and places where our lives are in the most disarray, when they're the most chaotic, filled with suffering, or jammed with expensive trinkets that glitter and buzz but no longer satisfy us. Jesus takes up residence in lives that are like a cluttered, unheated garage, or more accurately like a smelly cave. Where is it we really need him to enter? Where else will we *allow* him to enter?

It's not a beautiful or romantic place where Jesus is born. It's not even a warm place. Jesus is born in a gloomy place, for certain—a Bethlehem cave. We wouldn't imagine that a manger is a great place for an infant, but maybe it's for the best—for *our* best. Maybe the place and the way in which this newborn infiltrates the reality of this world is for our personal benefit. That way none of us can claim that our lives are no place that the Son of God would ever show up. Knowing what Jesus works with, we can't assume that our lives are beyond redemption, or that we've poisoned our minds, or ruined our health, or that we've destroyed our relationships, or used up all of our chances. Jesus is accustomed to working with exactly those kind of lives. In fact, he has a world full of them. Come to think of it, that's really all he has to work with.

He's in the habit of working with the worn-out, the used-up, basically the *leftovers*. You could call it his special way of loving us. It all began with the circumstances of his birth—taking what's *leftover* and using it for us. Jesus comes into our world, our lives, our homes, and was given a cold dirty corner in a cave back in the first century, and today we might only give him a cold dirty corner in the garage, piled to the ceiling with junk that should go to the thrift store. Be assured that Jesus comes to us even if we point him to a dark corner in the musty cellar of our souls, and say, "If you can do anything with this, Jesus, it's all yours."

In Bethlehem God determined to dwell among us, forever, so that Jesus' home is right here with us—be it ever so humble.

No matter how we treat him, Jesus is forever committed to our *leftover* lives and our last chance faith.

If all the world gives him is a *leftover* cross and a borrowed tomb, Jesus takes even those things and makes it his own—so that he can make *us* his own.

He does wonders with leftovers.

Glory to God in the highest! Amen.