



**The Manger
Luke 2:8-20**

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When e-readers came into existence (Kindle, the Nook), people predicted that physical books would disappear. When everyone had a computer at home and Internet access, everyone predicted we would no longer need paper. When we began to play games on the computer, people predicted that physical board games would disappear. And when it became possible to listen to music over our computers and phones, people said CDs would be obsolete.

When e-readers first came out, as I flew on airplanes, most everyone on the plane had one. It was much easier to travel with an e-reader than several bulky books. But something strange has happened in the last year or so. I've noticed on the plane that most people have physical books in their hands. There is something about touching a book and turning real pages.

All those other things that were supposed disappear? Paper still exists. Physical board games are making a comeback. CDs may be disappearing, but do you know what is making a re-appearance? Vinyl records. Apparently, turntables were hot items this Christmas.

Why is that? Why didn't these physical things disappear? Real, tangible items (the analog world) provide ways to touch, taste, smell, and relate to other people and things in ways that do not exist in the virtual world.

As humans, we have a longing for real, tangible, connections: to see, taste, smell and touch the world around us, to physically connect with other human beings, to look into people's eyes, to put our arms around someone, to feel the warmth

of a fire (have anyone of you tried using videos of fireplaces on your TV or computer? Totally weird).

God created us this way – to taste, touch, feel, smell. Therefore, God has shown up in our midst in physical form. The Incarnation. God wrapped in flesh. When Jesus arrived, people could see, smell, hear and touch God. God with us, dwelling among us. Connecting with us in a physical way. This is what Christmas celebrates.

So, once again, let us read the story of the Incarnation, God with us. As I read it and you follow along in your bulletin, imagine the smells of a barn and animals and hay. Imagine the sight of angels and hearing them sing. Touch the soft skin of a new, born baby lying in a manger. Imagine all these physical things.

Prayer: Gracious God, who came to us in a physical way so long ago, and is still among us today, take these words that we read and instill in us the smells and taste and sounds and hopes and joys of God in flesh. Amen.

Read Luke 2:7-20

Verse 7 Mary gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them....

When you see a baby, it is evidence of a love affair. Even with the baby Jesus. It is the love affair of God with his creation, his people. The skit that you heard Paul and I do, called The Incarnation, was about that love affair - of God trying to get out attention, drawing us to Himself. And as you heard, it was not easy.

God thought paradise was enough. God gave humans everything. But we wanted more – we wanted to be like God. Paradise didn't work, so humans were banished from it.

Ok, God said, you need something more concrete. Let us make a covenant together – kind of like marriage vows. I will be your God and you will be my people. You will be faithful to me and I will be faithful to you.

But we were not faithful.

All right, God said, you need more guidelines. Here are 10 commandments. This is how we can live together. I will write these on a rock so you don't lose them. And by the way, they are for your own good. Keep them and you will be happy.

We broke those, too.

God tried again: let me simplify the covenant: love Me and love your neighbor. I'll write this on your hearts. That was hard for us, too. But notice: every time we walked away from God, God was the one who took the initiative to bring us back.

Finally, God tried the most radical way to bring us back of all – God wrapped in human flesh. God becomes a love child. From now on, God said, you do not have to come where I am. This time I come all the way to you. I will do it all and all you have to do is believe me – believe that I love you enough to become one of you. Love you enough to humble myself.

And that brings us to a manger.

Three times Luke tells us the baby is in a manger; three times within a few short paragraphs. Mary laid Jesus in the manger. The angel tells the shepherds to look for the baby lying in a manger. The shepherds find the baby lying in the manger.

Remember, when scripture repeats itself, God is saying, "Pay attention. This is important. "Why is it so important to tell about Jesus' first bed?"

It was a pretty humble bed– a place where animals fed. Those of you who have pets know how yucky your pet's food dish is after they eat. In fact, the whole scenario was rather humble. Jesus was born to a poor struggling couple who were just common Jews. Jesus, born in a rather insignificant village, or so it seems. Born in a stable. Laid in a feeding trough. And to top it off, the birth announcement goes to shepherds, the lowest and the most humble of careers.

Compare this to where Jesus came from. Scripture says that Jesus was there in the beginning. He was with God and was God. He could say a word and the world came into existence. All things were made through him. Unlimited power was at his disposal, and in Christ was life.

But that first Christmas night, Jesus laid aside this power, and depended on teenage parents to change His diapers and feed Him on time.

Talk about humble beginnings. Why wasn't Jesus born to rich parents who lived in the big city? Maybe raise him in a palace. Why didn't Jesus have the best medical care in comfortable surroundings? Why did the angels come to the outcast shepherds and not the important people of the day?

Apparently, Jesus didn't come to impress the mighty and the powerful. Jesus came to lift up the fallen, heal the sick and save the lost. He came to the outcast and those living on the edges. That's why Jesus was born in a small village. That's why He was born in a lowly barn and laid in a feeding trough. That's why when the angels announced His birth they didn't go to Jerusalem or Athens or Rome and put on a display before the rich and mighty.

Oh, wait a minute. His star did go to the rich. But they weren't Jews. They were foreigners, Gentiles practicing a different religion. God came to them, too.

I bring you Good News for *all* people.

So as you look at this manger, this feeding trough, may it remind you that Jesus humbled himself, and came for you and for me because God loved the whole world. But as you look at this manger, there is even more meaning behind it. Something deeper.

Think about this feeding trough placed in the small village of Bethlehem. We learned in our classes on *The Journey* that Bethlehem means "House of Bread." Bread - one of the most common things in the world.
Bread - the staff of life for all.

God wanted his son available to all. “For I bring you Good News for all people,” the angel said. The Good News is lying in a feeding trough. Go to the house of Bread. And you will be fed.

Think of the time when Jesus multiplied the loaves of bread saying, “I am the Bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry (John 6:35).

Or, think of the last supper, when Jesus took the bread and said, “This is my body, broken for you. Take, eat, do this in remembrance of me.

Even the Old Testament tells us to eat the bread of God. Isaiah 55:2 says, “Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.”

It is no coincidence that Jesus was laid in a manger. The manger was a sign of what Jesus came to do. The baby in the manger, which held food for the barn animals, is the food for our souls. The angel said this is your sign – the baby in a manger – Jesus, the only one who can truly satisfy the hunger of our hearts. He came to satisfy a hunger that could not be satisfied any other way. Jesus nourishes and sustains us today.

“Bread of Heaven, feed me till I want no more.”

So, as we think about this manger, this dirty feeding trough for cattle, it was just a very ordinary thing. In fact, when you think about it, the only reason we are familiar with it is because scripture says God’s Son was laid in one.

And because God’s son was laid in an ordinary piece of farm furniture, all of a sudden it took on some dignity. Today, “manger” is a household name. It is sung in songs. Scripture upholds it. The ordinary has become extraordinary – a feeding trough for a stable became a cradle for a King.

I Corinthians 5:17 puts it this way, “If anyone has Christ in them, they are a new—extraordinary creature. The old has passed away. The new has come.” When Jesus Christ takes up residency in an ordinary life, the ordinary gives way to the extraordinary. Just as a feeding trough becomes a King’s cradle, we become exceptional.

You are loved, my friends. So much that God took on flesh so that you may know that love of God. Open your hearts to the One who feeds you. Come and eat of the bread of life. Taste and see that the Lord is good. Your life will be changed in a way that is extraordinary.

This is the Christmas story.