“A BABY … IN A MANGER”

Luke 2:1–20

Key Verse: 2:12

“This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Merry Christmas! In our culture Christmas means many things to many people. There’s Santa and his elves, Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer, Frosty the Snowman, and the Grinch. There’s candy canes, Christmas trees, Christmas lights, Christmas wreaths, Christmas shopping and Christmas gifts, Christmas parties, Christmas sweaters, Christmas cookies, Christmas drinks, Christmas movies and Christmas music. But in the hype of all this “Christmassy” stuff, it’s so easy to forget what the holiday’s supposed to be about: the birth of Christ. All we know about his birth is recorded in the Bible. And if we really look into it, we find it’s so different from most Christmas celebrations. In Luke 2 we see Joseph and Mary and shepherds and angels, and it’s all very interesting. But the real focus is this weird phenomenon: a baby … in a manger. In this passage Luke mentions the manger three times (7,12,16). A manger was a germ-infested wooden box that animals ate out of. Ew! It was odd for a newborn baby to be placed in a manger, of all places, so odd that it’s called “a sign” (12). What does this “sign” of “a baby … in a manger” mean? According to Luke, it’s what Christmas is all about, and it both comforts and challenges us. We’re going to think about today’s passage in three main parts. May God speak to us through his word today.

**First**, the contrast. In the first seven verses we notice that the author is making a contrast. In verse 1 we have Caesar Augustus. In verse 7 we have a nameless baby in a manger. Let’s think about these two people and what the contrast between them means to us.

Read verse 1. Caesar Augustus was the first real Roman Emperor. He was a dictator who ruled for 41 years. He had his name and face plastered in every city, and even on all the money. He lived in a palace in Rome. This Caesar Augustus got to sit on a throne in Rome issuing decrees. This time his decree was for a census to be taken. What’s a census? It’s a way to count people. “The entire Roman world” was all the countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, including modern-day Spain, France, Italy, Greece, Turkey, the Middle East, Egypt and North Africa. There were millions of people living in the Roman world. Why did Caesar want to count all those people? It was to get them to pay a tax and/or become soldiers. Caesar was doing this to support his army, to build Roman roads and buildings, and, so that he himself could keep living in the finest luxury. When he issued his decree, what happened? Read verse 3. At once, the entire Roman world had to move—which was about 45 million people. Rich or poor, slave or free, any ethnicity: each man had to stop whatever he was doing and go to his own town to register. Why did they all do it so quickly? Basically it was because the famous Roman army was stationed everywhere, and they had swords and skills that could kill people efficiently at any time.

Before we get to the second person in this contrast, Luke shows us how the census affected one poor, ordinary couple. Read verse 4. Nazareth was a small town in the northern part of Israel called Galilee. Bethlehem also was a small town in the south, just outside Jerusalem. The main road from Nazareth to Bethlehem was through desert and rough terrain, and robbers would hide along the way. Most poor people would take this journey on foot, and it would take at least three days. But for somebody traveling with a woman at the end of her pregnancy, it would take twice as long. Verse 4 explains that Joseph *had* to go to Bethlehem because it was “the town of David,” and since Joseph was from “the house and line of David,” he had to go there to register for the census. It’s impressive that Joseph was actually born in the house and line of David. But though his ancestors were royalty, Joseph himself was a common laborer, a carpenter (Mt13:55; Mk6:3), with little money, no power and no influence. But there’s more meaning here than this. It’d been prophesied that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, the town of David (Mic5:2). So indirectly Luke is saying in verse 4 that God was using even the decree of Caesar Augustus to fulfill his own promise to have the Messiah born in Bethlehem. God still is in control of all things. Read verse 5. We take it for granted, but it’s actually odd that Mary made this trip. Usually women didn’t have to go in person to register for a census. But Joseph took Mary with him, even though she was about to have her baby. Why? Verse 5 says that Mary “was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.” That’s another very unusual situation. Everybody in their small town Nazareth knew they weren’t married yet, but that Mary was pregnant. In their culture it was a great shame. People considered Mary immoral. But the Bible makes it clear: Mary conceived this baby not with Joseph or anyone else, but through the Holy Spirit (1:34–35; Mt1:18–20). Mary made a great decision of faith to do this, and through it God brought his grace to the world. Joseph knew this, and now he was in “protection mode.” There were no doubt some very self-righteous religious people in Nazareth who thought it was their Biblical duty to stone Mary for her seeming immorality. Joseph didn’t feel safe leaving her behind all alone among such people. At the decree of Caesar Augustus, Joseph and Mary suddenly had to make this hard journey to Bethlehem, and in her tender condition there was a possibility Mary might not even survive. Joseph and Mary were really helpless and powerless. Read verses 6,7. This has even more sad details. Everybody had gotten to Bethlehem ahead of Joseph and Mary. Nobody was willing to share a room with them. So when she went into labor, Mary had to go out to the barn, where the animals were. Can any woman imagine having a baby like this, out with the animals? How demeaning! It wasn’t warm and fuzzy, full of light beams and cute birds and flowers and butterflies; it was cold and dark, dirty and smelly. There was no receiving blanket, no baby clothes; Mary had to use strips of cloth, probably from her own garments, or Joseph’s, to keep the baby warm. There was no bassinet, so she took a manger and turned it into a makeshift baby bed. It might be the most humiliating baby delivery ever recorded.

And who was this baby? Earlier in chapter 1 the angel had said that he would be named Jesus, that he would be great, would be given the throne of his father David, and that his kingdom would never end (1:31–33). The angel also said he’d be “the holy one” and would “be called the Son of God” (1:35). What does it mean? John’s Gospel states it poetically and profoundly: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning” (Jn1:12). Then John 1:14 says, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” and that he’s “full of grace and truth.” The holy Son of God humbled himself to take on human form and become like us. A baby in a manger was completely helpless and utterly vulnerable. In our world so many people try to be smart and tough, and they strive hard to win. So many are struggling to climb up the social ladder. But Paul described Jesus, the Son of God, “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing…” (Php2:6,7a). When he came to this world, it was not in a palace, or even in a cozy, small home of servant people, but out in a barn among the animals.

Why did Jesus come to the world like this? Apostle Paul wrote: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2Co8:9). As he predicted the coming of Jesus, Isaiah may have said it best: “He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem” (Isa53:3). Jesus was born as a poor, oppressed, illegitimate, helpless, humiliated, rejected baby. Why? It was so that he could understand every single poor, oppressed, illegitimate, helpless, humiliated, rejected person who ever lived. Jesus stands in sharp contrast to Caesar Augustus on his throne issuing decrees, exploiting people. Jesus, from the beginning of his life, experienced all the sufferings of humanity so that he might heal us and give us life. Anyone who’s scared, or helpless, or vulnerable, wounded and hurting, can come to Jesus, who was born as a baby in a manger, and find real comfort, grace and acceptance. This baby in a manger also challenges our values and life goals. Honestly, are we striving to be humble like the baby in the manger, or are we longing to be like Caesar?

**Second**, the good news.Read verse 8. For centuries, shepherds had been looked down on as low-class people, too dirty to participate in religious activities. But these shepherds were faithfully carrying out their duty in the darkness of night. Read verse 9. Of all the people in the world to whom God could have sent his angel to announce the birth of his Son, he chose shepherds living out in the fields. Why them? Mary said in her song, “His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation” (1:50). God still reveals himself today to people who actually fear him. Then the angel reassured the shepherds. Read verse 10. Usually, good news is only for some people. Some people get a nice Christmas bonus, or get recognized for their achievements, but to everyone else it makes absolutely no difference. But the angel said the birth of Jesus is “good news that would cause great joy for all the people.” Really? Great joy? People today are so cynical. They release frustration through comedy, but even that doesn’t give them “great joy.” And this good news is really “for all the people”? That was especially important to the author Luke. In his Gospel he tells us that Jesus was for children, for women, for minorities, for social outcasts and rejects. Jesus is still good news of great joy for all the people of the world today, *all of them*. Why?

Read verse 11. We learn two things here. First of all, Christ is our Savior. He didn’t come to save us from poverty, political oppression, or from being social rejects. He came to save us from our sins (Mt1:21). We may think we have many problems, but our real problem is sin and all its consequences. Our sin separates us from God. Our sin is like a fatal disease. Our sin inevitably causes us to spiritually self-destruct. We can’t wash away our sin with soap and water. We can hide it from people, but we can’t hide our sin from God. Yet Christ came to be our Savior. How does he save us? He saved us completely through his suffering and death on the cross. He paid for all our sins through shedding his own blood; by faith in him we receive God’s forgiveness. His shed blood still has power to cleanse us from all the guilt of our sin, and to purify us from all sin (1Jn1:7,9). When we come to him by faith, we receive his grace, and we’re set free from sin—we’re healed. Freedom from sin brings us true joy. Christmas is about the best gift and the greatest joy: to be saved from sin by Christ our Savior. Christ also came to save us from the power of death, by his resurrection from the dead. Death makes everything seem meaningless. But when we believe that he rose from the dead, Christ our Savior saves us from death’s rule and gives us a living hope. Secondly, Christ is our Messiah and our Lord. Read verse 11 again. What does it mean that he’s our “Messiah”? It means more than that he just fulfilled a bunch of prophecies. Isaiah summarized the meaning of the word, “Messiah,” so well when he wrote: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa9:6). Jesus the Messiah is our Wonderful Counselor. When we’re unsure and don’t know which way to turn, Jesus shows us God’s clear path. Jesus the Messiah is our Mighty God. When we feel afraid, weak or vulnerable, he protects, empowers and defends us and takes away our fear. Jesus the Messiah is our Everlasting Father. Like a good father he always provides for us, loves us and disciplines us for our good. Most of all, Jesus the Messiah is our Prince of Peace. Caesar Augustus claimed to be the king of the peace, but it was just a political slogan. Jesus is the true Prince of Peace. He doesn’t bring human or political peace, but a deep inner spiritual peace (Jn14:27). What does it mean that he’s our Lord? He’s a different kind of lord than Caesar was. Philippians 2:8–11 reads, “And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross. Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Jesus became our Lord not through political manipulation or oppression but through his own suffering and death on a cross. God made most humble Jesus the King of kings and Lord of lords when he raised him from the dead and exalted him to his own right hand (Ac2:33; 5:31; Ro1:3–4; 14:9; Rev17:14; 19:16). One day Jesus will come again and prove he really is Lord. As Lord, Jesus rules quite differently from Caesar. Jesus is the Lord of love. When we try to live as our own lords we become miserable. But when we invite Jesus to be the Lord of our lives we find great joy.

**Third**, the sign.Read verse 12. As we’ve seen, a newborn baby lying in a manger would be so unusual, it would prove that what the angel was saying was true. Verses 15­–20 show us that seeing the sign helped the shepherds have personal faith. We too need to see this sign and believe. When we see the sign of a baby in a manger and believe, we experience what the shepherds did—great joy. Also, the sign of a baby in a manger characterizes the way God always chooses to work. God works in humble, unexpected ways and in humble, unexpected people. God loves to work a “manger,” not a “palace.” The question is, do we have eyes to see it? This world invites us to see so many spectacular things. Can we see the humble sign of God’s work? Let’s read verse 12 again. Look at verses 13–14. Jesus’ birth is glory to God. How so? Here, “glory” means “reveal.” Jesus’ birth “reveals” that God never forgot his promises, and that he never gave up on sinful humanity. Instead of wiping us out, he revealed his great love for us by sending Jesus. Jesus’ birth also brings peace on earth. People of this world really need peace. But this peace comes only to those on whom God’s favor rests. God’s favor rests on those humble enough to receive it.

This Christmas may God help us believe the sign and receive the baby in the manger as our Savior, Messiah and Lord. May each one of us experience his saving grace and be filled with great joy, the glory of God, and lasting peace.