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Luke 2:1–14

## FAITH AND SPLINTERS

From the very beginning of this story, Luke wants us to understand that the birth of Jesus is a prickly occasion—prickly for politicians and for religious leaders alike. This manger comes with enough splinters to irritate everyone who is in charge of maintaining status quo. From Caesar Augustus, to the Sanhedrin, from Rome to Jerusalem, the authority of Jesus lying in a manger is disturbing the whole world. You see, heavenly authority entering history to forever change our lives is nestled there, in that rough-hewn feed box, the splintery manger.

And the dramatic contrast is kept alive throughout the stories that Luke tells about Christ in his gospel. He juxtapositions the provisional earthly power surrounding Christ with the ultimate sovereign authority that Jesus embodies. It is a striking contrast if you look through and allow the second chapter of Luke to guide your thinking as you read the rest of the gospel.

It reminded me of a story from a book that Mary Pamplin gave me about White House events. It seems that President Roosevelt was entertaining a close friend. And after dinner, the two men talked well into the night. They discussed affairs of state. They had important conversations, deliberated weighty matters, and as the night developed, eventually their conversations wound down enough that Roosevelt asked his friend to step into the Rose Garden. It was a beautiful, clear winter night, like tonight. And the two stood there in silence, taking in the wonder of God's universe. And Roosevelt turned to his friend and said, "All right, I think we feel small enough now to go in and go to bed"—the power contrasted between earthly deliberations and a heavenly sprinkling of stars.

The manger and the seemingly insignificant birth of Jesus reminds us that the sacred purposes God brings into our lives often appear in the most ordinary circumstances. In fact, that which is extraordinary in our lives usually happens while we are living quite common existences. Ordinary people, even lowly shepherds, received the highest profile from God. The people who some saw as shiftless or untrustworthy are appointed as messengers of the amazing good news—the greatest good news the world has ever received, the announcement of our salvation. We often view shepherds and their role in the lives of the early church as disposable, as insignificant. Living in the fields you know they had to be like Old West cowboys. When we least expect it, from those we least expect, God makes an integral plan for each of us. And it miraculously unfolds, despite the fact that we are not aware that we have to be willing to be small enough, as FDR said, to encourage, to be encouraged, by the embrace of one another, the embrace of the

Holy One. Then we can see God at work not only in our lives, but in the lives of all those around us.

There is another wonderful anecdote about a young pastor, a tall pastor, walking home on Christmas Eve. He is feeling especially proud of his homily. In fact, he was proud of the entire liturgy of that Christmas Eve service. But as he strolled down the street toward his home, he notices a little boy trying to ring the bell on a house. He watches for a little while as the boy stretches on tip toe, even bounces up to try to catch the bell with his little fingers, but all to no avail. The bell is just out of his reach. So, crossing the street smartly, he goes over, this symbol of piety. He offers his assistance. Arriving behind the boy he says, "Let me see if I can help." And he places his hands underneath the boy's shoulders and lifts him up to a height where the young hand can reach out and press the buzzer. And then as he places the boy back on the stoop, he crouches down to the boy's level, he smiles a benevolent smile and asks, "And now what, little man?" And the boy grinned broadly and said, "Now we run."

We've taken so much of this wonderful gospel story and allowed it to fall on our ears and we never bother to look back at the humble feed box. The splintery edges of a manger remind us of the human fleshiness of all our encounters. It reminds us that when someone wants to discuss the sinfulness of the church, its inherent hypocrisy, the brokenness of religious institutions and its leaders, it reminds us that it has always been this way. The splinters of the manger help us own that if we are together, we will inevitably hurt one another—we will inevitably and unintentionally hurt those whom we love. Even when we are trying to be the most faithful, it still happens. Think how bad it is when we completely forget that God is in charge of our lives.

And so, even in church disagreements, even when there is confusion, the manger is still there with all its prickliness. It foreshadows the cross—the wood that holds our salvation. And in that manger God still comes. When our lives are crippled in grief, God still comes. God promises to be with us in heartbreak, when we are diagnosed with cancer, when we struggle with job stress or alcohol, when we are diagnosed as bi-polar, or when we admit we are suffering a bout of depression, God still gives us a sign—a child in a lowly feed trough. Not a beautiful bassinette, not a royal pillow, but a child whose birth brings hope, who brings in the folks from the rugged margins of life and offers them hope supported by a rickety manger. God still says to each of us: *I bring you good news of great joy, for all people. To you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*

As we worship God in this time of silence, as we allow the Lord to speak to our hearts, I hope that you will feel God's invitation, that you will hear the knock, that you will be nudged to allow Christ to be born in you anew today. Amen.