

The Baby in a Manger is Our Savior  
Luke 2:1-14  
Key Verse: 2:7

"...and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn."

Merry Christmas! For nearly 2,000 years Christians have celebrated Jesus' birthday on December 25th. They did this for evangelistic purposes. They did not know the actual date of Jesus' birth. But they wanted to replace Roman worship of the sun at the winter solstice with the worship of Jesus Christ. Today December 25th is widely regarded as Jesus' birthday. The early Christians succeeded. However, it is still a battle. We must come back to the Bible every year and renew the true meaning of Christmas in our hearts.

Today we will study the Christmas message as told in Luke's gospel. This passage naturally divides into two parts. The first part, verses 1-7, tells the story of Jesus' birth. In many ways it is the story of very ordinary people. However, there is an extraordinary characteristic of Jesus' birth. Jesus was born in a stable and laid in a manger--in poverty, utter simplicity, and stark loneliness. We want to learn the meaning of Jesus being laid in a manger. The second part, verses 8-14, is the angel's message which explains that the humble baby in a manger is the Savior of the world. This is truly good news of great joy for all people. Let's accept this news in our hearts today.

#### I. She...placed him in a manger (1-7)

In verses 1-3 Luke sets the background of the times. In brief, it was a Roman world. Look at verse 1. "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world." Caesar Augustus is widely regarded as the greatest Caesar and the time of his reign may have been the golden time of Rome. Following the military conquests of Julius Caesar, Augustus--a gifted administrator--consolidated and expanded the Empire, transitioning from a republic into an imperial government. At its height, the Roman Empire extended from the British Isles to Persia, and from Northern Africa to most of Europe. Under the military power of Rome, there was relative peace and prosperity. Caesar called this "Pax Romana," the peace of Rome. All roads led to Rome, and from Rome one could travel to most of the known world. The Romans were kinder to conquered people than the Assyrians. The Romans did not eradicate foreign cultures, but allowed conquered peoples to keep their basic culture intact. Nevertheless, the iron boot of Rome was ever heavy upon colonial people. In order to maintain the empire and allow Roman citizens to enjoy a privileged life, there was constant pressure on colonial people to pay taxes. There was also pressure to send their young men to join the Roman legions. This was probably why Caesar issued his decree for a census: to assess taxes and to raise soldiers for his legions. Quirinius, the governor of Syria at that time, was responsible for carrying out the census in Palestine and Judea, which were included in his territory. Quirinius enforced Caesar's decree absolutely. As verse 3 says, "And everyone went to his own town to register."

And so we come to Joseph and Mary in verses 4-5. They seem to be caught up in the power of Rome. To comply with the census, they traveled from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem, the city of David. The author says it was because Joseph belonged to the house and line of David. Some scholars believe that Mary, too, was of the line of David. It was about a three day journey. We may wonder why Mary had to make the journey, even though she was near the end of her pregnancy. Some think it was because Caesar's decree was so absolute that even a pregnant woman had to obey at the risk of her life. But it seems more likely that Joseph decided to take her with him in order to protect her. As a woman pregnant before marriage, Mary could be held in contempt in her society. There was even a danger that she could be stoned to death. Joseph understood Mary through the angel's special revelation to him. Joseph knew that the baby in Mary's womb was the very Son of God. So Joseph took upon himself the responsibility for Mary's pregnancy, though he would be misunderstood.

The author emphasizes that Joseph was a descendant of David. This would make Jesus a legal descendant of David's line. It would fulfill God's promise to David. Furthermore, Jesus' birth in Bethlehem fulfilled specific prophecy given by God. As we studied in Matthew 2:6, the prophet Micah foretold that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. As Luke 2:6 tells us, Jesus was born in Bethlehem. So we can see that God used even Caesar's decree to fulfill his own promises. God rules human history for his own redemptive purpose. Sometimes we feel frustrated and helpless when we see rulers of the world abuse their power to crush others. But God is over all. God is constantly working, even through evil rulers and their decisions, to carry out his world salvation purpose.

Look at verse 7. "...and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." Upon his birth, Jesus was placed in a manger, an animal's feed box. The Savior of the world, the desire of nations, the very Son of God had come into the world. But he was not born in a palace, a decent hospital or even a motel room. He was born in an animal's stable and laid in a manger. God Almighty, who ruled even Caesar for his own purpose, could surely have sent his Son in a different way. But he did not. He sent him in a manger. This tells us something about God, and about baby Jesus.

First, God loves mankind one-sidedly. There was an inn in Bethlehem which could have sheltered the Son of God at his birth. But there was no room; it was full. People who were forced to register for the census must have been very busy, and felt bothered by everything. They worked hard just to survive. On top of that they had to take time off from work, travel, and register for the census. They were just too stressed out to care about others, even a pregnant woman. The innkeepers must have relished the business boom. They did their best to take advantage of it, by letting the richest customers stay in their inns. Joseph and Mary had no money. They had no political clout. They were ordinary people who happened to be having a baby. People may have sympathized with their situation, but they just felt unable to do anything about it. In fact, this was a spiritual problem. It was the sin of selfishness. It was the sin of indifference toward God. Even though God came to visit them, they did not care or pay attention. Apostle John described this as follows: "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him" (Jn 1:11). God knew that people would respond in this way, and yet he sent Jesus anyway. It is because God loves the world. God loves the world, even when the world does not love him in return.

Second, God humbled himself to be with us. God is called "God Most High." Jesus is in very nature God. Colossians 1:16 says, "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him." Yet, to come into this world, Jesus gave up his heavenly throne. He put aside his power and majesty as God. He took on human flesh with all of its limitations and weakness, and he was born as a man. He was not born in a palace, but in a stable and laid in a manger, an animal's feed box. He was born into a poor family, and a seemingly ordinary family. He was born into a nation which was oppressed by the world power of the times. He went from the highest place to the very lowest place. John 1:14a says: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."

Jesus humbled himself in order to be with us--Immanuel--God with us. We could never reach up to God. In order to be with us, God had to lower himself to our level. He made himself vulnerable to us and approachable. When we think of the Almighty, Holy God, we become scared because we feel that we deserve his judgment. But he did not come to us as a judge with great authority, but as a little baby in a manger. No one is frightened of a little baby in a manger. Dr. William Altobar has many children. The youngest is a son he just adopted who is about one year old. He is very cute and has an African impression. So they named him "Obama." No one is afraid of this baby Obama. Rather they want to hold him and play with him. In this way, Jesus put aside his power and majesty so that he could be with us as a friend.

Since Jesus humbled himself in such a way, he can truly understand us. Hebrews 2:17 says, "...he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people." Jesus knows our sufferings and our sorrows from his experience. Jesus knows what it is like to be poor and alone, and to be despised and rejected. When we come to him in our agonies and in our weaknesses, he does not despise us. He understands and welcomes us. He takes us to his heart like a gentle mother and embraces and heals us. He invited us, saying, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest."

Jesus' coming as a baby in a manger makes a great contrast with Caesar Augustus. Though Jesus is the very author of life and the Creator God, he is full of love and humble. Jesus came in a manger to be the friend and shepherd of all kinds of people. Whoever receives him finds healing and new life. Jesus gave his life to save others and make us great. Caesar is a fallen man with a sinful nature. He crushes others to make himself look great. He destroys life. He looks glorious, but in the end he disappears like a mist.

As fallen men, we all have a bit of Caesar in us. Though we know this, we cannot change ourselves. But if we invite Jesus into our hearts, he will give us his loving and gentle and humble heart. He will change us to be like him and enable us to participate in his glorious life-giving work. I had the privilege of witnessing a manger ministry in the

Philippines. The Manila center is about the size of a two-flat house in this neighborhood, minus the basement. Two families with many children along with about 15 medical and nursing students live there together. Men's and women's quarters are strictly separated, but there are no private rooms. It is like a dormitory where everyone shares everything in common. There is one bathroom for men and one bathroom for women. There is no hot water. There is one television which is only used occasionally and in community. There is one computer with internet access which is prominently displayed. Alley cats go around freely and even enter the house and the rooms, making loud sounds when they are fighting or mating. There are cockroaches, fire ants and mosquitoes everywhere. And yet, in this manger, there is the vibrant life of Jesus Christ. Philippine coworkers rise early every morning and have daily bread. The men meet together at 5:00 a.m. and the women meet together at 6:00 a.m. Dr. William Altobar prays for each person and serves them one by one as their shepherd. Sacrificial women of God, Sarah Altobar, Esther Ippapo and Grace Reyto, together with younger women coworkers, prepare food for everyone both physical and spiritual. After eating together, they each go off to work hard at their jobs, studies, and practicing music. Behind all of this is Jesus who loves to care for his children and reveal his love and grace to them as they humbly seek him. Jesus' life in them has made it a place of spiritual power. God has used this manger to pioneer several campuses: Our Lady of Fatima U., U. of the Philippines at Manila, U. of the East at Caloocan, and U. of the Philippines at Diliman, which is the top university of the Philippines. On each campus I saw with my eyes many freshmen and sophomores who are being disciplined in Christian faith. God has also used this ministry to send missionaries to America, Canada, England, and the United Arab Emirates. Another will be sent soon: Sharon Cueto, Tim McEathron's fiancée. She is waiting for him to break through the U.S. immigration process by faith and bring her to Chicago.

As I left the Philippines to return to Chicago, I was very happy to have spent time with Jesus and his people. But I was also challenged in regards to the spirit of manger ministry. The simplicity and poverty of the manger seemed far away from me. At one time, Chicago UBF was like a manger. In the early 1980's many missionaries came to Chicago with nothing in their pockets except a Bible. Staff and intern shepherds barely survived by the support of their spouses. We had no money and we were outcast from American society in many ways. But we loved the word of God and loved one another and shared the mission of God together. In the midst of persecution and misunderstanding, we would work all the harder to increase our one-to-one Bible studies for the glory of God. Every year, when Dr. Lee studied Luke's gospel he helped us come back to the manger of Jesus and to decide to live a poor, pure and pious life for Christ and his kingdom. God blessed us in many ways. We have developed and grown, becoming better organized, more efficient, more specialized, and better integrated into American society and the American Christian community. I believe that the Lord will use this to make Chicago UBF more fruitful in campus mission in the years to come. But do we still have the spirit of the manger ministry: loving, humble, pure, poor, sacrificial and giving? Or are we like Caesar who indulged in luxury and trampled on the weak? That can be a haunting question. When we accept Jesus into our hearts, he will help us to restore a manger spirit.

## II. A Savior has been born to you (8-14)

Though the Son of God had been born into the world, he came in such a quiet way that no one knew about it. But God announced it to several people. Who were they? Look at verse 8. "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night." We may wonder why God chose these shepherds to have the very special privilege of receiving the first Christmas message. Perhaps God was pleased with their faithfulness to their mission to watch over their sheep even through the night. Perhaps it was because they were humble in heart and pure enough to receive the message simply by faith. Perhaps it was because they were shepherds, and God himself is called a Shepherd. Perhaps God chose them for all of these reasons. In any case, the Lord sent his angel to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them. The shepherds could feel the holy and almighty power and presence of God. And they were terrified. No one can stand in the presence of God because all men are sinners. The shepherds suddenly became aware of their sins. In their hearts were unbelief, selfishness, pride, laziness and so on. They felt that they should be judged and condemned for their sins. But the angel said, "Do not be afraid." The Lord had not come as their Judge, but with a message of good news of great joy that would be for all the people. What is it?

Look at verse 11. "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord." The birth of Jesus in the manger was the birth of the Savior of the world--the Messiah promised to come, for whom all of Israel had been waiting. Matthew 1:21 explains the meaning of Savior precisely. It says, "She will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." Jesus saves us from our sins. Sin is the real problem of any person. Some may feel that a big debt is their real problem. Others may feel that a

broken relationship with family members is their real problem. Others may feel that a traumatic event or failure is their real problem. These are indeed problems. But the root problem of all people is a sin problem, a broken relationship with God. It is a disease we are born with, and which we accelerate through the wrong choices we make in life. Sin grows like a fatal disease that disfigures and corrupts our inner being until we become hideous. Finally it leads us to death, not just physically, but spiritually. We can do nothing to solve our sin problem. But God sent Jesus to save us from our sins. During Jesus' life on earth he welcomed all kinds of sinners and helped them to follow him. He planted the truth of God and hope in their hearts and helped them to live a new life. Finally he went to the cross and was crucified. He died, shedding his blood for our sins. Isaiah explains the meaning of his death as follows: "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." When we simply believe in Jesus he saves us from our sins and gives us eternal life and a living hope in the kingdom of God. This is the best news for anyone. People are looking for something at this Christmas time. Some are looking in the stores for a special present to give or to receive. Some are looking to family gatherings for a time of joy and happiness. Some are looking to find that special someone in the holiday season, dreaming that their life is a romantic comedy. But we must look to Jesus first. God has given us the best gift, our Savior Jesus Christ. Let's receive Jesus our Savior in our hearts at this Christmas. This gives us great joy and everlasting joy.

To help the shepherds believe the message, the angel gave them a sign. It was the baby in the manger. This small and vulnerable baby was the visible evidence that the Savior had come into the world, as God had promised. We must learn to see the signs of God's work in our times as well. It may not be something spectacular. Rather it may seem small. But it reveals the life of Jesus working in us. When we see these signs, instead of the noisy displays of Caesar Augustus, we can be happy and joyful because we know that God is working to save his people from their sins.

To confirm the angel's message, God did something spectacular. Look at verses 13-14. "Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.'" This chorus was fantastic. It expressed the joy of heaven over the birth of Jesus. Jesus' birth revealed the glory of God. The little baby in the manger was God's answer to all that was wrong in the world. The little baby in the manger was God's victory over sin, death and the devil. The little baby in the manger was God's love and saving grace for mankind. Through him God's kingdom would be restored and God's righteous reign established and the world would be restored to paradise once again. Those who accept him in their hearts can have God's peace in this troubled world. They live in hope and with great joy. Let's accept baby Jesus in our hearts; he is God's love, good news of great joy for all people.