

A Baby in a Manger
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 guest room available for them."

Merry Christmas! On this Christmas day we want to think about the baby in a manger, the most poignant symbol of Christmas. Nowadays we can see many manger scenes. People interpret the manger in many ways. To some, it is a beautiful decoration that moves our hearts to humble meditation. To others, the manger simply looks dirty and poor, and it evokes feelings of sympathy. And to others, the baby looks so tiny, weak and helpless. So they despise him saying, "What can he do?" But the author Luke sees the baby in a manger in quite a different way. He sees him as the symbol of God's saving grace upon all mankind. There is profound meaning in this. Let's see what the true meaning of the baby in a manger is.

Verses 1-3 tell us the background of Jesus' birth. In those days Caesar Augustus was the Emperor of Rome, and Rome ruled the world. Caesar's power was absolute. When Caesar issued a decree, there was no exception regardless of human condition. Even a pregnant woman had to make a long journey just before her delivery date. It was a severe violation of her human rights. Joseph and Mary seemed to be the unfortunate victims of Caesar's decree. Yet there was God's providence in this event. Joseph and Mary, who lived in Nazareth in Galilee, had no reason to go to Bethlehem the town of David. But they were forced to go there by Caesar's decree, traveling such a long distance on foot or by donkey. In this way, baby Jesus was born in Bethlehem as God had promised (Mic 5:2). Here we learn that God controls history to accomplish his salvation purpose.

Verses 6-7 describe how Jesus was born. Let's read these verses together. "While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she 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." Among the details mentioned here, one of the most striking is that baby Jesus was laid in a manger. The author Luke emphasizes this fact by mentioning the manger again in verse 12 and again in verse 16. To Luke, the baby in a manger encapsulated the meaning of Jesus' coming into the world. It summarizes the Christmas message. We can learn several things here.

First, the baby in a manger is the center of history. At the time Jesus was born, the Roman Empire was in power. It was a vast empire built upon superior military power, which seemed to grow stronger day by day and year by year. It seemed that the Roman Empire would never perish. The politics of Rome seemed to be the driving force of world affairs. Everyone listened closely to news from Rome; no one paid attention to the birth of a poor baby in Bethlehem. However, the author Luke saw things differently. To him, the Roman Empire was merely the background for the birth of Jesus. From the beginning of history God promised to send a Savior (Gen 3:15). For this, God had been working steadily from one generation to the next. Now God's time fully came and he sent Jesus into the world as a baby in a manger. From God's point of view, everything prior to Jesus' birth pointed to him, and everything after Jesus' birth referred back to him. Since Jesus' time, the gospel has been preached throughout the world. When the gospel is fully preached to the whole world, world history will end. Matthew 24:14 says, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." So Jesus' birth is the center of history. Through the coming of Jesus, history was divided into two parts: B.C. and A.D. Likewise, through the coming of Jesus into a person's heart, his life can be divided into two parts: before Christ and after Christ.

Before the coming of Jesus, God showed the prophet Daniel a vision of the rising and falling of the kingdoms of the world. These kingdoms are compared to a statue of gold, silver, bronze, iron and clay. These kingdoms look strong and intimidating. But they are crushed by a kingdom that the God of heaven sets up. Daniel 2:44 says, "In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever." Accordingly, the Assyrian Empire, the Babylonian Empire, the Persian Empire, the Greek Empire, and the Roman Empire all rose and fell. But the kingdom of God has never fallen; it has only risen steadily; it continues to grow and prosper. Jesus is the center of human history. Jesus is the Eternal King, whose kingdom will never end (Lk 1:32-33).

Second, the baby in a manger is the friend of all people. Why was Jesus born as a baby in a manger? He was not born in a palace, but in the poorest and lowest place. He was not even born in a middle class family, but on the bottom of society. Why? It was because he wanted to be our friend. A baby in a manger is cute, charming, and appealing. No one feels threatened or intimidated by a baby in a manger. Everyone can approach him without fear or

anxiety. Anyone can feel welcomed by him. Jesus really wants to be our friend. Hebrews 2:17 says, "For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God." As a friend, Jesus understands us. Jesus knows what it is like to be poor. Jesus knows what it is like to be despised. Jesus knows what it is like to be rejected and oppressed. Jesus knows what it is like to face the most fatalistic situation and the most sorrowful condition. So when we come to Jesus, all these things are understood by him. He understands our hearts; he knows our situations; he feels our pains, sorrows, wounds and deep agony, for he experienced what we experience. People really want to be understood. One reason couples fight with each other is misunderstanding. Many end their discussions by saying, "You just don't understand me," beating their chests. Who can really understand another person? One woman sought love from men. She found one who seemed to understand and love her authentically. However, after the honeymoon was over, his understanding soon reached its limit. Their communication broke down, frustration set in, and one day he beat her. It was the end of their marriage. She tried to find another man, one whose character was different, more suited to her. But his nice manner did not enable him to truly understand her. And again, the relationship was broken. Her journey of seeking men's understanding and love continued through five successive relationships, each one ending in failure. Her heart was broken and she was deeply wounded. No man could truly understand her. Then, on a hot summer's day near a well, she encountered Jesus, her true husband. Jesus really understood her. She was moved by his deep understanding and told others, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did" (Jn 4:29). In this way, Jesus understood people one by one when he was on this earth. Jesus understood Levi, a selfish tax collector. Jesus understood a lonely man with leprosy. Jesus understood passionate and mysterious Mary Magdalene. Jesus understood each of his disciples, who were full of weaknesses. Since Jesus truly understands us, we can open our hearts and receive comfort from him. Only Jesus can understand us. So let's not seek too much understanding from others; let's come to Jesus, who is our true friend.

Third, the baby in a manger is the symbol of God's love. It seems that there are many problems in the world. But in fact, there are really only two big problems. One is the sin problem, and the other is a love problem. People need love. People thrive on love. Love makes people happy. People want to be loved and they also want to love others. In order to love others, we must learn how. Those who are loved by their parents learn to love others. But those who are not loved, may not know how to love others. Yet, even those who are dearly loved by their parents are not satisfied. People cannot be satisfied with human love alone. We can be satisfied only when we receive God's love. When Jesus was born as a baby in a manger, it was God's love breaking into the world to touch mankind. God's love breaks any barrier to express itself to his loved one. Though the world was hostile, and did not even make room for Jesus at his birth, he came anyway. God loved us first. The baby in a manger expresses God's love powerfully, but gently. Most people feel unloved. Even those who have received a lot of love from others still feel that something is missing. So they try to satisfy their desire for love through romance, pleasure-seeking, or in other ways. But in the course of doing this, many people are wounded. We need the love that only Jesus can give. Then we can be satisfied and feel true happiness in our souls. I know one person who did not receive proper love as a child. His father abandoned him and his mother was too busy surviving to pay proper attention to him. So he felt empty and his inner man was wounded. But through Bible study with a sacrificial woman of God he came to know Jesus and to experience Jesus' love. His life has completely changed. He is now a loving husband and a shepherd for children and sings wonderfully for the glory of God all the time. There is another person who was dearly loved by his godly parents and grew healthy and strong in many ways. Still, something was lacking. So he tried to fill his heart with music. He became an excellent violinist. But one day he realized that music could not save him from death; nor could it truly satisfy his soul. As he struggled to come to God, God came to him. Through Romans 1:16-17 he accepted God's love and the righteousness that comes by faith. Since then he has grown as a disciple of Jesus and a servant for others. These days the Lord is using his spiritual insight and sensitivity to build up the True Vine club for outreach ministry at NEIU. No matter who we are, we can only be truly satisfied by the love of God in baby Jesus. Let's accept the baby in a manger. Let's receive God's love and share his love with others who do not know him.

Fourth, the baby in a manger is the Savior of all people. Look at verses 8-9. Though the baby's birth went virtually unnoticed on earth, God sent an angel to announce his birth. This was the greatest event in human history. To whom did the angel bring this great news? To Caesar Augustus? To a regional Roman official? To the president of the Jerusalem Seminary? No. He brought it to shepherds who were regarded as low-class people. However, they were faithful, humble, pure, hardworking and alert--even at night--to keep watch over their sheep. To God, they were most valuable people who could receive this great news. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified (9). But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people." What could be this good news that causes great joy for all the people? The world seems to be full of bad news. It is full of hatred, envy, strife, deceit and malice. People have no

understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. People are dying, not only from diseases or accidents, but mainly because of their sins. The wages of sin is death. People suffer from the power of death while living in this world. They suffer from fear of death, sorrow, loneliness and meaninglessness. People do not want to die. But no one can escape from the power of death. Who can save us from this miserable destiny? There is good news. Let's read verses 11-12. "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger" (10-12). Here we learn that the baby in a manger is the sign of the Savior of the world. The baby in a manger seems to be weak and helpless. But in him there is the life of God. Though he entered the world as a small baby, the life of God in him grew and grew until it covered the whole world with God's glory. He is God with us to understand us and to love us. He comforts us, forgives us, and gives us eternal life. He gives us the living hope of the glorious kingdom of God.

This news is not just for certain special people. It is for all the people. When we share this news with anyone, people are moved and can be saved. As you know, last month I visited North Korea. Our team from America was accompanied by four government guides wherever we went. One of them wore dark sunglasses and a leather jacket. He did not speak much. I asked God for wisdom to somehow share the gospel with him. Then I was inspired to share my personal testimony, highlighting that I had been evangelized and discipled in Christ through two great men from Korea. As I shared this, he began to shed tears. So did I. The Holy Spirit was living and working among us and a seed was planted. The good news was for him, and it is for all North Koreans. We have heard of some North Koreans who escaped across the Tumen River to China because they were starving to death. One pastor embraced them and took care of them by providing food and shelter. He did so with one condition: They had to listen to the gospel message through audio tapes. Since they had no choice, they listened. But as they listened, something happened in their hearts. They began to believe and they were transformed. Their hearts began to burn with the love of God. After that, they voluntarily returned to North Korea to share the gospel with those who had not heard, even though they knew it meant certain martyrdom. The birth of Jesus, laid in a manger, as the Savior of the world is really good news of great joy for all people. This good news of Jesus is not something temporal. It is God's gift of everlasting life and the coming of his kingdom. It means not only salvation and reconciliation with God, but peace among people. When the gospel message touches our hearts we begin to love others with God's love. We can forgive others as we have been forgiven by Jesus. Through practicing forgiveness we can have true peace with each other. So, as we come to this end of the year, let's forgive one another and decide to love one another with the love of God. The birth of Jesus is glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests (14). The birth of Jesus is the good news that makes life worth living. May baby Jesus be born newly in the manger of our hearts and in our nation.