

A SIGN OF THE MESSIAH: 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! Today is Christmas Day. Historically, Jesus was born over 2,000 years ago. Still, he lives and works to bring salvation “today.” “Today” Jesus is born to each of us. This is good news that causes great joy for all people. The question is, “Do you have this great joy in your heart?” If not, why? Are you disappointed that an angel did not visit you personally? Perhaps you spent too much on presents and worry about your bills. Maybe you wanted a special Christmas gift, like a personal drone, a 360-degree video camera, or an Italian coffee grinder, but it seems unlikely. Or it may be that you expected to have a happy family celebration; but experienced strife instead. In this joyful Christmas season, rather than having peace and joy, many suffer from troubled relationships, loneliness, depression, and regret. They feel it would be better to cancel Christmas. But we need Christmas. Today let me share a special Christmas gift that is for all of us. This gift will bring us true joy and peace so that we can say “Merry Christmas” from our hearts. This gift is baby Jesus in a manger, a sign of the Messiah. Let’s learn what this means and why it gives us great joy and peace.

First, “In those days” (1-7). Luke explained the background of Jesus’ birth by saying, **“In those days....”** In those days, Caesar Augustus was the Emperor of Rome. Originally known as “Octavius,” he was adopted by Julius Caesar. Upon Julius Caesar’s assassination, there was a power struggle between Octavius and Marc Antony. Marc Antony lost the battle, mainly due to Cleopatra’s seductive influence. Octavius gained power and ruled from 27 B.C. until 14 A.D. During this time, Rome stabilized politically and prospered economically. The Roman Senate bestowed on Octavius the title of “Caesar Augustus.” He was recognized as the one who brought “Pax Romana,” the peace of Rome. But in reality, there was no peace under the Roman rule. The Roman Empire was like a powerful, awful beast which fed on the heavy taxation and military draft of colonial people. This is probably why Caesar issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world (1). At his one word of command, the entire world moved and everyone went to their own town to register. At that time Caesar seemed almighty and baby

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Jesus looked weak. Yet Luke mentions Caesar simply to set the historical context of Jesus' birth. His focus is on Jesus. Luke's view of history is true. Now we think of Caesar only when we eat a Caesar salad. But right now, the baby Jesus' birth is being celebrated all over the world. In America, many say: "*Merry Christmas*," in Spanish: "*Feliz Navidad*," in Mandarin: "*Sheng Dan jie Kuai le!*," in German: "*Fröhliche Weihnachten*," in Russian: "*srazh-dees-TVOHM*," in Tagalog: "*Maligayang Pasko*," in Japanese: "*Merii Kurisumasu*," in Indonesian: "*Selamat Natal*," in Korean: "*Sung Tan Chuk Ha Hamnida*."

In verses 4-5, against the background of Caesar's rule, Luke introduces two people: Joseph and Mary. They seemed ordinary, but they were main characters in God's history. Mary carried in her womb the baby Jesus. In order to register for the census, they had to travel from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea, the town of David (4-5). This was a rather long journey of about 80 miles. They had to travel on foot or by donkey, over unpaved roads and through rough terrain. It was very dangerous for Mary. But they had to go. We can imagine Mary's painful steps and Joseph's trembling heart. Their suffering seemed to be local, insignificant and meaningless. They could easily feel fatalistic or sorrowful. But there was deep meaning in it. According to prophecy, the Messiah had to be born in Bethlehem (Mic 5:2). God was using Caesar's decree so Jesus would be born in Bethlehem. God is the Sovereign Ruler of history. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and 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 (6-7). Jesus' birth was the most important event in history. It should have been celebrated more than the Chicago Cubs' first World Series victory since 1908. Five million people attended that victory parade. But Jesus' birth went unnoticed. He was ignored, even despised. No one welcomed him. People's hearts had become cold toward God and others. They were below zero, perhaps 27 degrees below zero—the coldest temperature on record in our city (Jan. 20, 1985).

Second, "I bring you good news" (8-11). While God worked through ordinary events on earth, he gave an amazing revelation from heaven announcing Jesus' birth. It was given to humble shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night (8). An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and

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they were terrified (9). Suddenly, holy and Almighty God, the Sovereign Ruler, was present among them. His awesome presence shocked them. They did not know what to expect. They probably felt that they were going to die. Yet the angel had not come to judge. He said, **“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord”** (10-11). It was a message of good news of great joy! Why do people need this message? It is because human beings are generally sorrowful. We try to look happy and be cheerful, but in the corners of our hearts there is sorrow. Why? Is it because we don't have money? Not really. The root of sorrow is sin and its consequences, which include the devil's torment, death and final judgment. In 2016, some well-known American icons passed away, including astronaut John Glenn, actress Florence Henderson, and boxer Muhammed Ali. Not only them, but all of us will die someday and face God's judgment. This is a universal truth and there is no escape. Throughout history, no one could solve this problem. But God sent his one and only Son Jesus as the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1Jn 2:2). Jesus freed us from the power of sin and death. As Hebrews 2:14b-15 says, **“...by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”** After death, Jesus rose again and opened the way to the kingdom of God and everlasting life. Jesus ascended into heaven, sits at the right hand of the Father, and serves as our Great High Priest. He always lives to intercede for us and gives grace and mercy in our time of need. Jesus is our Savior; he solved our real problem once and for all and takes away our sorrow. In Jesus, we can be joyful and thankful always.

Third, the sign of a baby in a manger (12-20). Let's read verse 12. **“This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger”** (12). The word “manger” appears here, for the second time in this passage. In verse 7, the baby was laid in a manger because there was no guest room available for him. In verse 12, the baby in a manger is the sign of the Messiah. In verse 16, the shepherds see the baby in a manger, recognize the Messiah, and praise God (16). At first glance, it seems that baby Jesus was laid in a manger by accident. Yet a baby in a manger became the sign of the Messiah. Together with the cross, it is one of the defining symbols of Christian faith. We see so many manger scenes in the world today. There is deep meaning in this sign. What can we learn from it?

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This sign reveals God's humility and gentleness. According to his birth announcement, the angel said Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and is the Son of God. He is in very nature God. Who is God? God is the Creator of the heavens and the earth. His eternal power and divine wisdom have made all that is. The great scientist Johann Kepler said frequently, "O God, I am thinking Thy thoughts after Thee." Great scientists do not invent truth, they merely discover the wisdom of God the Creator little by little. If we put all their profound books together, it would take up just a small corner in God's library. God's wisdom and power underlies all that we are impressed by today, including atomic power, the Internet, and space travel. God is also the Sovereign Ruler of peoples and nations. This is well revealed in the book of Daniel. Daniel went to Babylon as a teenage exile. When he honored God with his faith, God gave him insight to interpret dreams about the future, which foretold the rise and fall of human kingdoms. Eventually, Daniel prophesied the fall of Babylon, through the writing on the wall, and saw its immediate fulfillment. Nations rise and fall, rulers gain power and lose it, but God reigns forever as the Sovereign Ruler of all. Yet this mighty, powerful God became a little baby and was laid in a manger.

This mystery reveals the character of our God (2Ti 3:16). He is humble; he is gentle. He made himself small and vulnerable so that we could approach him. He did so out of pure love and genuine goodness. He really loves people and works for the good of sinners. Though we have wounded his heart by our sins, he took the initiative to come to us first. Though he was not welcomed, he came anyway and his love broke through the darkness in a ray of light, revealed in the warm, sweet smile of a little baby in a manger. Our great God reveals a divine humility that leaves us in awe. He comes to us so humbly, that we cannot but accept him with a shout of joy. He wants us to learn of his humility and delight in his gentleness and grow to be like him. He does not want us to be proud, but humble. We are told in Philippians 2:5-7, **"In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: 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, by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."** Let's learn Jesus' great humility and be useful to God.

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This sign also reveals God's merciful, serving heart. Why did Jesus come as a baby who was laid in a manger? Hebrews 2:17b says, **"...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."** Though Jesus was sinless, he needed to learn to be merciful. This mercy comes from sharing our sufferings as a human being. No one can truly understand another's suffering unless they have experienced it for themselves. Jesus felt the pangs of hunger, the vulnerability of poverty and the oppression of a foreign nation. He was shamed as though he was an illegitimate child, seems to have lost his human father at a young age, was misunderstood by his family members and rejected by his hometown people. He was despised by the Jewish leaders, who called him demon-possessed. He knows our sorrows and sufferings and understands us. While dwelling among us, he lived as a servant. Anyone felt that they could approach him for help. During his ministry, many marginalized and scandalous people came to him. He shared fellowship, eating and drinking with them, to the degree that he was called, **"a friend of sinners and tax collectors"** (Lk 7:34). Among those who approached Jesus were a man with leprosy, a wayward woman, a chief tax collector, a condemned criminal. Accepting them was just the first step. Jesus went on to serve them with his power to bring healing and restoration to them one by one. Jesus told them respectively, **"I am willing; be clean," "Your sins are forgiven," "I must stay at your house today," and "Today, you will be with me in paradise"** (Lk 5:13; 7:48; 19:5; 23:43). Finally, Jesus offered his sinless life as the perfect sacrifice for us all.

No matter who we are, we need Jesus' mercy. One beautiful and talented young lady was hurt by her father's abandonment at a young age. Jesus understood her, met her, and became her Everlasting Father. She still struggles, but Jesus' tender love heals her day by day. One young man was sick with sin and forfeited the privilege of marriage to a godly woman. With a broken heart, he came to Jesus. Jesus embraced him, helped him learn faith, healed him, and gave him new Spirit. He became a powerful servant of God. During 2016, I was often lacking wisdom and helpless. So, I cried out to Jesus for his mercy frequently. He visited me again and again and provided everything I needed. At this moment, I thank Jesus for his mercy.

We have all received mercy from our Lord, who came to us with deep understanding and power to help us in our time of need. As we have received

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mercy, so we should practice mercy with a servant's heart, as Jesus urged us to do in the parable of the good Samaritan. So as we consider Jesus' manger mercy, let's do more than thank God. Let's open our hearts to those around us who are in need. Let's welcome anyone and everyone who needs God's help with a heart of mercy. Let's especially learn mercy toward young students, and pray to understand their struggles and agonies genuinely. If we see them with critical eyes, we become judges who alienate. But if we have manger mercy toward them, we can be God's coworkers to restore and heal them, and raise them as great servants of God.

This sign further reveals the sacrificial, giving heart of our God. When God sent Jesus into the world, he gave everything to us freely. By taking on human flesh and being laid in a manger, Jesus was giving up heaven for us. Why did he do this? St. Paul said, **“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”** (2Co 8:9). Jesus became poor for us. While we were spiritually bankrupt, Jesus came to us free of charge. He has given us every spiritual blessing (Eph 1:3-7). Anyone who has Jesus is more wealthy than Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg and Travis Kalanick¹ combined. Out of the overflowing riches of Christ in us, we can joyfully sacrifice and give for the glory of God. Let's give of our time to share the good news of Jesus with others. Let's give of our material things to further God's world mission. In the past fall semester, Joshua Min often spent his evenings walking around the Loyola campus sharing the gospel with students. It was not because he has plenty of free time. He works full time to support his family, raises three children with his wife Mary, serves as a fellowship leader, and handles the heavy load of tech support for our worship service. In order to share the gospel with students, he had to decide to sacrifice his precious leisure time. He did this joyfully, with the conviction that he is a rich man in Jesus. As a result, several students began one-to-one Bible study with him. In truth, the work of God is built up through people like him, who offer genuine hidden sacrifices to love God and serve others.

Finally, this sign demonstrates God's glory and peace. 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 heaven,**

¹ These are the founders or cofounders of Microsoft, Facebook and Uber respectively.

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and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests” (13-14). This little baby reveals the glory of God in the highest heaven. How? Here, “glory” means that the Father God’s honor was rightly declared in the heavenly realms, as well as on the earth. God’s matchless wisdom and power was displayed through his great salvation. It was the sign that God’s good purpose would triumph over all evil and unrighteousness. God’s love would overpower the hatred of the world. God’s grace would wash away all the sins of mankind. God’s life would swallow up death in victory. God would crush the devil and all his minions. It was the sign that God’s kingdom would be restored on earth as it is in heaven. This gives us peace. Without Jesus, we are ruled by dark powers that make us fearful and insecure. We feel that we experience hell on earth. But when Jesus rules over us with his mighty power and love, we have peace—real peace. We are right with God. We are more than conquerors through his love. We enjoy heaven while living in this world. We are in his mighty hands and no power can separate us from him. We are on the way to paradise to dwell with Jesus and his people forever.

Jesus’ birth really is good news of great joy for all people. In verses 15-20 we can learn how to respond. Like the shepherds, we believe the gospel message and look for the signs of God’s work. Let’s especially remember that the sign of the Messiah is a baby in a manger. Let’s follow the manger lifestyle and engage in a manger ministry. Like Mary, we should ponder these things in our hearts. And we should share the good news with others, giving praise and glory to God. As we do, we will be the most joyful people on the face of the earth. Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year 2017!