

Finding The Real Jesus in the Manger

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(Isaiah 9:2-7 NRSV) The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness-- on them light has shined. {3} You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. {4} For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. {5} For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. {6} For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. {7} His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

(Luke 2:1-20 NRSV) In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. {2} This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. {3} All went to their own towns to be registered. {4} Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. {5} He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. {6} While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. {7} And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. {8} In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. {9} Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. {10} But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: {11} to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. {12} This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." {13} And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, {14} "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" {15} When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." {16} So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. {17} When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; {18} and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. {19} But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. {20} The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they

had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Back in 1994, two Americans were invited by the Russian Department of Education to teach morals and ethics in

their prisons
their businesses
fire and police departments
and even at a large orphanage.

The most interesting this was that they were told they could teach from the perspective of their faith.

So they went and did it.

It is the experience of these two Americans in the Russian Orphanage that I want us to look at.

According to one of them:

there were about 100 boys and girls in the orphanage, children who had been abandoned, abused and left in the care of a government-run program.

He tells the following story of what happened when the holiday season approached and it was time for the orphans to hear - for the first time - the Christmas story.

"We told them about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem. Finding no room in the inn, the couple went to a stable, where the baby Jesus was born and placed in a manger".

Throughout the story, the children and orphanage staff sat in amazement as they listened. Some sat on the edges of their stools, trying to grasp every word.

"Completing the story, we gave the children three small pieces of cardboard to make a crude manger. Each child was given a small paper square, cut from yellow napkins I had brought with me. No colored paper was available in the city. Following instructions, the children tore the paper and carefully laid strips in the manger for straw. Small squares of flannel, cut from a worn-out nightgown an American lady was throwing away as she left Russia, were used for the baby's blanket. A dolllike baby was cut from tan felt we had brought from the United States.

"The orphans were busy assembling their mangers as I walked among them to see if they needed any help. All went well until I got to one table where little Misha sat - he looked to be about 6 years old and had finished his project. As I looked at the little boy's manger, I was startled to see not one, but two babies in the manger.

"Quickly, I called for the translator to ask the lad why there were two babies in the manger. Crossing his arms in front of him and looking at his completed manger scene, the child began to repeat the story very seriously. For such a young boy, who had heard the Christmas story only once, he related the happenings accurately - until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger.

"Then Misha started to ad lib. He made up his own ending to the story as he said,

'And when Mary laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no mamma and I have no papa, so I don't have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with him. But I told him I couldn't, because I didn't have a gift to give him like everybody else did. But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I had that maybe I could use for a gift. I thought maybe if I kept him warm, that would be a good gift. So I asked Jesus, "If I keep you warm, will that be a good enough gift?" And Jesus told me, "If you keep me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave me." So I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and he told me I could stay with him - for always.'

"As little Misha finished his story, his eyes brimmed full of tears. The little orphan had found someone who would never abandon nor abuse him, someone who would stay with him - for always."

We call Jesus by the name Immanuel, which means "God is with us."

Tonight, on this Christmas Eve, I hope that we can discover, like the orphan Misha, that the God who came in Jesus Christ will never abandon or abuse us, but will stay with us - for always. That is the real baby in the manger!

Jesus promises to be with us:

- When the cancer biopsy comes back positive, instead of negative.
- When the final exam is marked with an "F," rather than an "A."

- When the spouse of 15 years stomps out the door, and doesn't return.
- When the dream of success in business is once again downsized and diminished.
- When the late-night long-distance call communicates a death, not a birth.
- When the longing for family harmony is shattered by a shouting match.
- When the desire for companionship is drained by another lonely holiday season.

In all these depressing, discouraging, and disillusioning situations, Jesus is with us as Immanuel, God with us.

We're never completely without companionship or support, as long as there are two babies in the manger.

So, why don't we do a very good job of keeping Jesus warm?

What is it that threatens to separate us from the Christ child these days?

Part of the problem is blindness - we simply don't see the manger.

In our frantic search for comfort and joy, we look for lasting pleasure in all the wrong places:

- sporting events
- clubs,
- parties
- Internet chatrooms
- professional conferences.

Sure, there is certainly some good to be found in these gatherings, but they also distract us from the one place we can find unconditional acceptance and unending peace: in the manger.

It is only in a close relationship with Jesus Christ that we discover how truly valuable we are, as children of God.

There is also the problem of our incessant busyness - we just don't have time for the manger.

These past few weeks our days have been driven by endless office parties, school concerts, church pageants and shopping excursions, not to mention the cultural requirements of holiday decorating and Christmas-card-writing. Kind of ironic, isn't it, that the escalating demands of Advent prevent us from taking time to focus on the reason for the season?

We also face the challenge of doubt - sometimes we just don't believe in the manger.

The world is such a violent place, and so often victory seems to go to the powers with the largest arsenals and the most ruthless tactics.

What chance does a baby in a manger have against suicide bombers, serial killers, machine-gun-toting terrorists and brutal, corrupt governments or even security fences?

It's not a fair fight.

But, no single life has changed the world more than the life of that Bethlehem baby — a life that challenges people to look beyond this world to the kingdom of God.

The truth is — that there's always room for another baby in the manger.

If we make the trip to Bethlehem, we find the One who will stay with us on our journey, every step of the way, and will guide us toward an everlasting kingdom, one marked by love and peace and justice. If we give this baby comfort and support, we will find true comfort and support for ourselves as well.

Tonight we need to testify to the power of Christ in our own lives, and to tell the world about what Immanuel is up to.

That's what those two men did when they traveled to Russia. That's what little Misha did when he put two babies in the manger.

There's a lesson in this for us. Our challenge as Christians is never simply to stay close to Jesus and to enjoy his forgiveness, acceptance and peace. We also need to explain to the world why we are choosing to be one of two babies in the manger.

Jesus invites you to join him in the manger. Enjoy him always, and share him in all ways.

- Maybe you've adopted a low-income family this Christmas.

- Or you can promise to pray in a consistent, disciplined way for a troubled region of the world.
- Or you can agree to mentor a young person.
- Or you can brainstorm with others about creative and compassionate ways to reach out to our neighborhood.
- Or you can teach a class of children, opening their minds and hearts to the stories of the Bible.
- Or you can ponder how best to live out your Christian faith in the workplace.
- Or you can include in your New Year's resolutions a commitment to daily prayer and Bible study.
- Or perhaps you'll talk with friends about what Jesus means to you, and why you feel a need to be close to him.

The invitation has been extended. Come and join Jesus in the manger.