

Dec. 13, 2009 Luke 2:1-7 “The Manger of Meaning” by Richard Boatman

¹In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ²(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³And everyone went to his own town to register. ⁴So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷and 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.

Spiritual and natural truth runs parallel. When God decrees a spiritual word, physical or natural things are set in motion to bring this to pass. Micah 5:2 says, “But as for you, Bethlehem, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from long ago, from the days of eternity.” This spiritual word uttered seven hundred years before the birth of Christ set into motion natural developments that would now include Caesar’s decree for a census and a difficult journey for a young pregnant girl and her husband. Mary, who was close to giving birth, may have felt disconcerted by the 85 mile trek from Nazareth to Bethlehem. But the word of the Lord had been uttered; spiritual words were now being manifested through what appeared to be natural processes. The Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

It is no coincidence that **Bethlehem** means “**House of Bread.**” Bread was the staple item. From manna in the wilderness that fed Moses and the burgeoning nation to Jesus feeding the five thousand—physical and spiritual sustenance has always been provided for the people of God. This One who was born in Bethlehem, the *house of bread*, said in John 6:35, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.” In this same marvelous context Jesus said, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven; those who eat of this bread shall live forever” (v. 51).

Jesus’ coming “down from heaven” was also a blending of spiritual and natural truth. The prophets had declared that the Messiah would come through the **line of David**. One might think that such a lineage would be a near perfect representation of humanity in preparation for the Messiah to be born. But when we peruse the genealogical trail from Abraham to David to Jesus as recorded in Matthew, we see more of a spaghetti western—the good the bad and the ugly. Perhaps the most revealing line in the genealogy is this one: “David was the father of Solomon,

whose mother had been Uriah's wife" (1:6). David had sinned—messed up big time. He not only committed adultery with Bathsheba but had her husband Uriah placed in harm's way to be killed. But David repented—a soul wrenching repentance—and God restored him. And remarkably, through David and Bathsheba Solomon was born. And this would be the lineage of the Messiah. Forgiveness is seen throughout all of Scripture, even in the genealogy!

When we think of genealogies, we think of the past; we think of history. It can seem pretty far removed from our lives. We're often guilty of this with Jesus as we think of him as the baby in Bethlehem or the Savior on the cross. But we as Christians must become more acutely aware of **the present day ministry of Jesus Christ**. This current day ministry is done through the Holy Spirit and the Word. When I was growing up, it seemed that few Methodists understood much of anything about the Holy Spirit. The deadness of the services and the lifestyles of "religious" folks gave testimony to this glaring disconnect. They spoke of God the Father and of Jesus the Son, but rarely broached the subject of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was a past-tense Savior, but there was little if any vitality in the knowledge of his ongoing, present day ministry. But beloved, none of what we celebrate during Advent carries any weight if we fail to realize the ultimate purpose of the incarnation, namely, for Christ's Spirit to come live in us and through us. Indeed, the incarnation happening in us...Christ being made flesh in our lives—believers being "conformed into his image" (Romans 8:29)—this alone gives **meaning to the manger**.

A young boy named Zach struggled with school, especially math. He was bright, but just never applied himself. His homework was sloppy, and his grades plummeted. His parents tried everything, but nothing worked. Finally, out of desperation, they removed him from public school and sent him to the local Catholic academy. Zach walked into the Catholic classroom and immediately had a change of heart. He'd come home from school and go right to his room for homework. His daily work dramatically improved. At the end of the quarter he brought his report card home. All his grades were great and in Math he got an *A*. His parents sat him down and said, "Zach, what has happened? This is a miracle. Did you receive some sort of divine inspiration or what?" Zach said, "When I walked into that classroom the first day and saw that guy nailed to the plus sign, I knew they took this school stuff seriously."

Beloved, we need to take this manger "stuff" seriously. When we look at the cradle we must see the cross; and when we look at the cross we must see the crown.

Before the August 9th storm hit, my home office was a mess. I had allowed it to become the catchall for clutter—books and papers and clothes being strewn about. When the hail came and the windows shattered, the challenge was multiplied in my room where chaos had ruled. In the aftermath, my office was out of commission for weeks. Living with bare floors and plywood windows, I longed to once again have a room...more than a room, a sanctuary of study and prayer to which I could retreat. After weeks of long waiting, I have my office back. I have diligently kept it clean and clutter free. That which I had taken for granted is now highly valued.

Today's passage says, "...**there was no room for them in the inn.**" You know, clutter happens. I don't think the inn keeper meant anything personal. It was a busy time and his rooms were full. "There was no room" for the Savior wasn't a gesture of hostility; other people...other things had simply filled the inn keeper's life. Clutter happens. And the clutter—that muchness or busyness or preoccupation with the good rather than the best fills our lives. Sometimes it takes a storm to help us reevaluate what's really important. Sometimes things in our lives have to get worse before they can get better. Change often doesn't happen until the clutter of our lives is somehow exposed to us so that we can value making room for the best.

I recently read the "letter to Santa" from an autistic eleven year old unable to be mainstreamed in the school system. Though his mind sometimes seems cluttered to some, he reads at a twelfth grade level and sees what others do not see. He writes: *Dear Santa: Please do not come to my house this Christmas. The people in Africa are in famine, torn by war. Most of all their prosperity and future is lost. They need the gift of food, the gift of hope, the gift of peace, the gift of love. This is written in an extreme tone of urgency--quick help them before it is too late. James*

An eleven year old whose mind sometimes seems cluttered has made room for the best. Perhaps he, better than most of us, sees what this season is about.

How is the room of your heart? Is it made ready for Jesus? Or, like my office was, is it cluttered with stuff that makes it hard to find him? **Jesus being wrapped up in cloths** reminds us that we find him in the daily. Here we have a king. But he would not be discovered in a palace or the seats of power. He was found in a lowly manger bundled in the cloths of a humble mother. I think we still find him in the cloths...in the common routines of which God is apart. As we open the inner room of our heart to the Lord, he unfolds the cloths of our daily lives and reveals Jesus in the midst of the most ordinary things. Elijah found God not in the big fire or wind or earthquake, but in the still small voice. Shh. This season learn to be still and know he is God. Listen to him and find real meaning in the manger.