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Luke 2:6-7, **NRSV.**

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.

Intense Symbolism: *The Manger*.

We are all familiar with the beginning of Chapter 2 of the Gospel of Luke:

2 *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.*

Luke is the only Gospel writer to mention that Jesus was laid in a manger. There are a few historical issues to consider here. First, the last word of this passage, "*inn*", is translated wrong. The Greek word in the Gospel is "*katalymati",* and a better translation is "guest room", or perhaps even better, "upper lodging room". We believe that this passage says that Jesus was born in a house, but that the upper rooms where people slept and lived were full, probably because of the

census, and so Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were in the ground level room where animals lived. Another issue is that historians have been completely unable to find any census that was initiated by Rome for this area at this time. And third, the Romans did not require people to go to the home of their ancestors to be counted when there was a census, and so there would have been no need to go to Bethlehem in the first place. They would have stayed in their hometown of Nazareth if there had been a census. I'll get back to these details.

Let's look at another word in this passage: "manger". This is a translation of the Greek word in Scripture: "*phatnē",* and it is a good translation. Luke says that Jesus was born in a "*phatnē",* a feeding trough for animals. The word "manger" that English translations use dates to the Middle Ages and comes from a Latin word having to do with eating. In modern French the same root has led to the verb "to eat" in French, "*manger*", spelled exactly like our noun "manger". But wood was not very prevalent in ancient Israel. The English Bible often translates Hebrew or Greek words a bit oddly so that Scripture will mesh with old European concepts, when our translations were being written. This is why Joseph is often called a "carpenter", when in truth the Bible uses the Greek biblical word *"tektōn",* which more clearly means "one who builds with stone". Carpenters were more common than stoneworkers in Europe. Likewise, our western image

of the manger as being cobbled out of wood slats is inaccurate. Many ancient mangers from the time of Jesus have been unearthed: they are made of a very soft limestone, which was easy to carve and was highly prevalent at this time and place. In Jesus' world, if something could be made of limestone, then that was the material of choice: it was used heavily for houses, and even furniture tended to be largely stone. And most likely, the animals ate wild grass outside and were not fed straw indoors, and so the manger probably only had water in it before Jesus was placed there. It is true, though, that occasionally animals would be given food of some sort in the manger. In sum, we could imagine that Jospeh and Mary emptied the manger of water, washed it out, and then Jesus was laid to sleep in the stone trough, but with no cute little mattress of straw to keep him warm. The mangers that have been found in archeological ruins in the Holy Land are about six to eight inches deep, and measured maybe two feet by one foot, and stood perhaps 12 to 30 inches high off the ground. That is where Jesus slept.

In the Book of the Prophet Micah, we read this:

2 *But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,*
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.

This prophesizes that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. The reason for Ephrathah in this verse is to distinguish it from another smaller and lesser-known town called Bethlehem up north in the Galilee region. The Bethlehem of Jesus' birth was south, just below Jerusalem. People have suggested that Luke and Matthew said that Jesus was born in Bethlehem simply to make the story fit with the Old Testament prophesy; the other two Gospels don't provide such details of Jesus' birth. Only Luke mentions the census, and only he talks about Jesus being born in a room for animals. Did Luke invent the census to provide an excuse for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem? These are details that we will probably never know the answer to – but Jesus certainly could have been born in Bethlehem.

However, whether Jesus truly was born in a stone manger in the lower room reserved for animals in a guest house, or if much of this was conjecture or actual fiction on the part of Luke, one thing is true. This birth story is filled with intense symbolism. You can imagine these two poor people, with Joseph being a tradesman and both he and Mary perhaps illiterate, searching for a safe place to place their baby to sleep. A stone manger might be the best thing available. Either way, the three of them in the room reserved for animals and Jesus himself in a limestone manger speaks of extreme humility. Right from his birth Jesus was marked as someone accessible to the marginalized. The first people told of his

birth were shepherds, people very low on the social ladder and people associated with livestock. The manger speaks of a willingness to rough it out, to perhaps live a life of deprivation and of ultimate suffering. Don't forget that later John the Baptist calls Jesus the "Lamb of God" in the Gospel of John, and that lambs were sacrificed in the Temple. It's also true that during the time of Jesus, newborn lambs would often be placed in mangers to protect them from harm.

We see Jesus as someone who from birth stepped directly into the messiness of lower-class life, into the realm of a creature meant someday to be sacrificed. The room was unheated, had a dirt floor, and was shared with whatever animals needed to be protected from predators and the cold. There would have been the smell of manure. Whoever was providing shelter for Mary, Joseph, and their newborn certainly wasn't worried about this indignity. We wonder how a newborn couldn't be accommodated in the main part of the house. Yet this was where Jesus was meant to be born – at least symbolically. Jesus started life being prepared to relate to those who are lost, suffering, homeless, unloved, uncared-for. His birth speaks of a person with empathy. A manger, since it holds food and water, reminds us that Jesus calls himself the "bread of life" in the Gospel of John. He is the source of spiritual nutrition for us, and as a baby he slept in the place where animals went for their nutrition.

There are multiple Proverbs that speak of the evil of pride and the importance of humility. The Gospel writers and the people of Jesus' world would have been quite aware these sayings, and they would have striven to live by them. Proverb 8:13 says:

13 *The fear of the LORD is hatred of evil.*
Pride and arrogance and the way of evil.

From day one, literally, Jesus tells us that we must live humble lives and never let pride keep us from doing whatever nasty job has to be done to help another person. We can live with the joy of knowing that when we feel disgraced, disrespected, or at the bottom of the social ladder, we are indeed like Christ.

When I was a boy, we had a nativity play at school one Christmas. One of the mothers in the congregation volunteered her baby and placed the kid in the wooden manager, crafted by a man in the congregation who was a carpenter. The older girl who played Mary was under orders to keep a close eye on the baby. When an older boy, the one playing Joseph, accidently kicked the manger slightly, Mary slapped him on the shoulder and rather clearly said something like, "Hey, that's a real Jesus, not a doll, dummy!" She was right. That baby was a real Jesus. Jesus did not sleep in a golden crib in a palace. And the whole point is that Luke was letting us know that Jesus is one of us, no matter how lowly we are.