

Great Expectations: Jesus, Shepherds, and some Angels

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[0 : 00] I want to direct your attention to Luke chapter 2, which is divided in two readings on pages 8 and 9. So if you turn back a page, Luke 2, 8 and 9, sorry, Luke 2 on pages 8 and 9, and particularly to verse 7, which is on page 8.

Now you don't see a lot of mangers in the course of a normal week.

At least I don't. But it's obviously very important. It comes three times in Luke 2, twice in this chapter. And the second time it comes in verse 12, where the angels say it is a sign from heaven, the fact that Jesus is born in a manger.

It is from the French word manger, to eat. It refers to a wooden box outside in a cowhouse. Not in the house, but out the back in some sort of maybe a stable.

It's not the big rack in which the straw and the hay go. It's a low box for food slops that the cattle want to eat, the food that won't stay in the rack.

[1 : 31] And as a location, it's not really where you put a newborn, even if you wrap him up in some old strips of cloth. This is supposed to be the biggest event of history so far.

The son of God leaving the glory of heaven, coming to earth to open a door from heaven to heaven. God in human flesh, a miracle to blow our minds and our hearts.

But the manger just seems so ordinary and unsanitary. And I think it helps explain why we have this constant desire to make Christmas more fairy tale-like.

It's so plain and pedestrian, the way it's written. We've got to add some bling to it. We've got to add some festiveness to it, to make it somehow more Christmas-like.

And it's so important to us to come back year by year to the record of what actually happened because we add to it. We add sentiment and we add snowflakes and in the end we make it into something that it's not.

[2 : 37] So what is the point of the manger? What is the importance of Jesus being born in a manger? And I want to suggest three reasons from this passage. The first is what it tells us about Christmas.

Then what it tells us about ourselves. And then what it tells us about Jesus. So if you go back to the first section, the top of page 8.

What does Jesus being in a manger tell us about Christmas? Let me quickly spin over those first words again. Just listen to what kind of thing you're reading here.

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus. That all the world should be registered.

This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

And all went up to be registered, each to his own town. Joseph also from Galilee, town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem. Because he was of the house and lineage of David.

[3 : 35] To be registered with Mary, his betrothed, he was with child. It's so familiar, isn't it? It's so familiar it's easy to miss how down to earth and unpretentious the record is.

This is about registers. It's about tax records and political decisions. Caesar, emperor, that's what he called himself, Augustus, the August one.

Caesar, back in Rome, wanted to tax his empire and raise as much money as he possibly could. So he ordered a registration, an enrollment. Every single person has to go back to the place of their family city to enroll.

And then I can tax them. It's not mystical or magical, is it? It's rooted in a particular time in history when particular leaders were in power.

Joseph, we're told, is a descendant of King David. He has the great inconvenience of bringing his eight-and-a-half-month pregnant fiancé all the way from the north of Israel in Nazareth, right near the top, all the way down past Jerusalem to a little town called Bethlehem, only to find that all the rooms in his relatives' homes are completely full, so they have to sleep out the back with the animals.

[4 : 49] And she has to give birth in a semi-public shed, not in the home, and then she has to put the baby in the food trough in the manger. And the manger is just one detail in a passage full of these historic details.

And it doesn't matter how creative you are, you just can't make it into a fairy tale. And this tells us something very important about Christmas, you see. Christmas is not a set of timeless truths. It's not a set of principles that inspire us. It's not a grand spiritual teaching that might be very helpful and useful to us in our day-by-day life.

It is the announcement of events that have taken place in the concrete reality in our world of history. And this is important at a time in Canada when we seem to be busy rewriting any history that makes us uncomfortable.

It's very important to remember the Gospels record what happened. We're tied down to a particular feed box in Bethlehem when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

[5 : 57] And there's so much reserve and discipline about the way this is being written that when the baby finally arrives in verse 7, we're not told anything about the baby that a mother or a father would want to know.

You know, is it cross-eyed? Has it got a lot of hair? Has it got all the fingers? You know? It's just first-hand reporting. And the angels do the same thing for us.

And that's in the second half of the reading on page 9. Here are supernatural messengers from heaven. They terrify the shepherds. Shepherds are in the field looking after their sheep.

The angel appears and he says in verse 10, Fear not. Behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

Good news. He doesn't say, Behold, I bring you a good religion, good principles, good advice. So you see, at the heart of Christianity is good news.

[6 : 58] It's not advice which we have to try and keep and get depressed and come back and try and keep again. It's not a philosophy that explains all of reality which I choose to subscribe to.

It's not some nebulous, elusive mystery about being positive and having once a year where we all turn kind on each other. It's an announcement to all the people. And the shepherds don't turn to each other and say, Well, that's just his interpretation.

No, no, it's an announcement. And they race off and see what's going on. So this is the first thing I think the manger teaches us. The manger says Christmas is the opposite of a complicated ideology.

It's good news, a great joy for all people. There's nothing elitist about it. It's not the long and dreary search for the divine. It's the announcement that for you is born the saviour, Christ the Lord, and he's placed in a manger.

That's what the manger tells us about Christmas. Secondly, the manger tells us something very important about ourselves. If you look down at that second reading, the second section of chapter 2, in verse 11, the angel says, It's good news because, For unto you is born this day in the city of David a saviour who is Christ the Lord, and this shall be a sign for you.

[8 : 25] You'll find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. The Son of God has come into the world, something nature itself could not conceive.

The angel says God is giving you a sign. What is the sign? The baby's in a food trough. Now, I think it's exactly this detail the angel says is a sign from heaven, that the baby is the saviour of the world, Christ the Lord, born in a food trough.

It shows to us just how unaware we are of what is really significant. You see, take Caesar. He's at the top of the totem pole.

He has status and money and power to burn. But he has no idea that as he tries to tighten his grip on the world, to squeeze as much money as he can out of his empire, that is the very thing that brings Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, so that the baby will be born in exactly that place which God marked out 700 years before through the prophets.

Caesar compels Joseph to bring the pregnant Mary to Bethlehem, completely unaware. And no doubt the people in Bethlehem, crowds were moaning and complaining about all the things that we usually do, about house prices and about the indignity of the tax rate and the hypocrisy of the governing officials, and they're completely unaware.

[9 : 55] You see, the sign of the manger tells us something about ourselves, that we're spiritually blind because we are dazzled by our own pursuit of status and success and money.

We put it differently. We all struggle with the Caesar complex. We all have little Caesars inside us. We're all trying to create and to curate our lives as though we were God, trying to save ourselves through our status and success.

And that would be all very fine if there were no God. If there were no God, I could make up my rules and you could make up your rules and I could build my status my way and you could build your status your way, just as long as you didn't come into competition with me.

Thank you very much. They were all unaware that our salvation came into the manger. And there's something in us that just resents that Christ has come as Lord to save us.

When we live as though, we want to live as though, I am my own Christ, I am my own Saviour, I am my own Lord. You might not have thought of yourself as a Caesar before, but you say to yourself, look, I've got this empire to run.

[11 : 09] I can't listen to angels. I've got taxes to think about. I'm very busy. And underneath the Caesar complex is this antagonism and hostility to Christ.

And that is why the angels say, to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour who is Christ the Lord. There is a two-sidedness to the message of Christmas and the New Testament.

Jesus is both Saviour and Lord. Because the New Testament is about two comings of Christ. It says there is going to be a second coming at the end of time.

This is what it means to call him Lord. When Jesus will come again to judge every person who's ever lived, it is breathtaking and an overwhelming thought that the baby born in Bethlehem will one day sit on God's throne.

We'll all stand before him where the secrets of our hearts will be laid bare. That's what it means to call him Lord. And when they call him Saviour, they're talking about his first coming in the manger.

[12 : 12] Christ the Lord, who will one day be the judge at the last, has already come into the world to be our Saviour, to save us from that judgment. And the sign of the manger is the sign of how lost we are and how much we need saving.

That he is far more willing to come and to seek us and to save us and to endure whatever so that we will not be ashamed on that day. And I'm aware that even as I'm saying this, there are two processes going inside of each of us.

Deep down, when you become aware of the claim of Christ on your life, you're both attracted to Christ and repelled away. We're attracted to Christ, but we don't like the thought of someone else being our judge and Lord.

And it's so easy to run back to our carefully constructed palaces and make do with sentimentalising Christmas. I think this way of the shepherds is so helpful to us.

You know, they're pretty close to the lowest rung on the status ladder, but they still need saving.

And the angel appears. When he appears, As the angel slips out of heaven, God allows a little bit of glory to shine around that angel and it knocks the stuffing out of the shepherds.

[13 : 36] They are terrified. Whenever angels appear in the Bible, whenever the glory of God shines in the Bible, the reaction of people is not happy and contented and peaceful. It's always a bit shattering.

Because the glory of God is so heavy with goodness and life and love and majesty, the normal reaction is to just feel your whole humanity is unravelling before you.

And it's not the naked power of God. It's the exposure to real love and to real purity and to a heavy, solid joy. And throughout the Bible, the first reaction of people is, I have never experienced and I've never loved this way.

I've never had this kind of joy. I can see that trying to play Caesar is not only futile, but it is an offense to this kind of glory. The reaction is, I was lost.

I've set my heart on other things. I'm deeply corrupt and polluted. What I need is a savior who'll dethrone this wretched Caesar in my heart and cleanse me and forgive me and bring me into friendship with this Lord.

[14 : 40] And the manger says, good news, Christ is born, not to judge, but to save. So the manger tells us something about Christmas, tells us something about ourselves, and finally, it tells us about Jesus Christ.

No crowd, no important people. This is how the Son of God comes into the world. This is how salvation comes to us. And it points to the amazing humility and condescension that this one, the Son of God, goes from sharing the eternal glory with God the Father in heaven into a stable and then into a manger, the food trough.

The King of glory comes as one of us. Mildly lay his glory by, born that we may never die. There's nobody who's ever traveled a greater distance. There's no one who's come from a higher place to this very lowly place to become one of us.

You might have seen that video that's doing the rounds right now of baby Jesus being stolen at a church Christmas play. I'm sure you're all going to race home and find this video.

The choir is singing away in a manger and one of the sheep, a little three-year-old girl, stands up and goes over to the manger and there's a doll playing Jesus. She grabs the doll and makes off with him. And she moves off the stage a little bit and she's dancing with the doll.

[16 : 05] And then the long arm of Mary, probably a six or seven-year-old girl, comes and grabs the other arm of Jesus and starts a tug of war between these two on Jesus. It's great fun.

You can't help laughing. But you can't help watching it without thinking of just how vulnerable Jesus made himself. This is the sign of the manger, that he chooses to make himself vulnerable for us and to the ultimate vulnerability of the cross.

And the only way he dethrones all our little Caesars is to enter the world as a baby. The only way to save us is to become one of us, to become like you and I are, subject to our temptations and pressures, to take our nature upon him, to be made bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh.

And it had to happen so that he could die and rise again in our place. That's what we celebrate tonight. Emptied himself out of heaven, came to give himself for us.

We didn't reach up and pull him down. He came down to bring us up to God. And if he had come surrounded by angels to the most comfortable palace on earth, it would still be undeserved kindness and blessing.

[17 : 20] But to come to save us, to stoop down so far, to be born in a stable, put in a manger to die on the cross, it's just pure grace. The manger is primarily a sign of Jesus' love for us, that he becomes poor so that we might become rich.

And it's not enough for us to grasp just that he was born saviour. This is the final thing. The angels say, unto you.

So it would be all very well for him to be born over there. But if he was born for you, if you grasp and receive that he's come for you, then the manger has a greater significance.

Good news of great joy. There is no greater joy. And God calls on us to embrace and to receive the man who's wrapped up and put in a wooden manger, crucified later on a wooden cross, a saviour, Christ the Lord.

So as we remain seated, let's bow our heads for prayer. Amen. O God, who makes us glad with the yearly remembrance of the birth of your son, your only son, Jesus Christ.

[18 : 40] Grant that as we joyfully receive him as our redeemer, we may with sure confidence behold him when he shall come again to be our judge. He lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit now and ever.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.