**The Wonder of a Manger**

Rev. Clinton G. Roberts Luke 2:1-12 First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest December 12, 2021

On the 23rd of September, in the year 63 BC, a boy was born into the wealthy Octavian family in Rome. They named him Gaius Octavius. After conquering Rome, his maternal uncle Julius Caesar adopted Octavius as his son and heir, bequeathing to him his estate—and the loyalty of his legions.

When Julius Caesar was assassinated in the Roman Forum in 44 BD, it was Octavius, Mark Antony and a third man named Lepidus who assumed power. But this was not to last. Lepidus was exiled in 36 BC and after a bloody civil war, Mark Antony and Queen Cleopatra of Egypt were defeated at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC. After fleeing back to Alexandria, the two lovers committed suicide as the forces of the victorious Octavius approached. This marked the end of the Roman Republic.

In 27 BC, Octavius was crowned Emperor Augustus—a title meaning “consecrated, majestic, venerable and revered.” Caesar Augustus dramatically expanded his realm, buffering it to the East with little client states like that ruled by King Herod of Judea. And it was here, after the most powerful man on earth had built his cobbled roads, and enacted his comprehensive system of taxation to squeeze from his subjects every last denarius he could—it was here in a feedlot outside a rustic inn about as far from Caesar’s palace as one could possibly be—it was here that another boy was born, in a place called Bethlehem, where his adoptive father had returned in order to be taxed.

More than 2000 years have passed since then, and the face, if not the name of Gaius Octavius has been all but forgotten—even though when he died at age 75, he was turned into a god. Today, when the month of August comes around--everyone leaves on vacation.

But what about the other little boy? The one who didn’t take over the world? That child died on a cross outside a city wall at less than half Augustus’ age. Yet today, people still come to his house each week to offer him homage, and his kingdom is found in the conquest of the heart, where people of every land and nation call themselves not by the name Augustus, but by the name of Jesus—Jesus Christ.

I

Ed Robb in his book The Wonder of Christmas points out that the location and birth of Christ was not by accident. Both are foretold in Scripture, which attest to the planning and provision of God. But “if God was in charge,” says Robb, “and God was—how did God allow this to happen?”

Nowadays we tend to romanticize the wonder of the Manger with its angels and shepherds, its ox and its ass. We love to sing “*Away in a Manger,”* where *“the little Lord Jesus lay down his* *sweet head.”* But the reality of that birth was anything but rosy. It was harsh and it was hurried—more like the prospect of giving birth in an unheated garage behind a Holiday Inn Express outside, say, Hutchinson, Kansas. But today, it isn’t our Holiday Inns that are full-up: it’s our hospitals. In the last several weeks I’ve seen patients being treated in corridors due to the impact of Covid. I’ve called on parishioners in the maternity wing recovering from cancer.

No, the birth of our Savior, as wonderful as it was, should not be seen as something easy or sentimental. The child grew up to say, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” “I have not come to bring peace,” he said, “but a sword.” This sword separates his kingdom from all the other kingdoms of this world—and the hearts of those who seek it from the hearts of those who don’t. If Jesus were actually born in America, it wouldn’t be shepherds “watching their flocks by night” who would come to see him, but garbage collectors and the people in beat-up cars who deliver our morning newpapers who would come *“to see this thing that the Lord has made known to us.”*

In short, the wonder of the Manger lies in its radical humility: that God would come to dwell with us not in power but in weakness, arriving not in a palace but a barn. Madeline L’Engle writes in her poem “The First Coming,”

*He came, throwing off glory like fiery suns, leaving power behind, leaving the storms of hydrogen clouds, the still-forming galaxies, totally vulnerable as he emptied himself.*

That is the wonder of the Manger. And that is the scandal of the Cross.

Bethlehem means, “House of Bread” in Hebrew. It is a fitting name for a place where a baby grew up to say, *“I am the bread of life,”* and who would offer himself to any, saying, “*Take. Eat.* This is my body, given for you.”

This is a life of humility, from one who consorted with outcasts, healed the unclean, fed the hungry, spoke truth to power, and respected women as he respected men.

II

But perhaps it is our children who understand the wonder of the Manger best of all. My friend Megan tells the story of how her middle child grabbed Jesus out of the Nativity Scene at home saying he “couldn’t come out until Christmas.” So she placed him in a drawer, folded inside a field-book on birds.

My friend Linda has a grandson who started taking baby Jesus with him everywhere, keeping him near in his pocket day and night. One day he managed to lose the figurine in a grocery store. As you might imagine it had to be found! So a voice came over the loudspeaker: “We are looking for a small-sized baby Jesus. It was last seen in Aisle 10.” Now with the help of many, the baby was fortunately found.

In The Wonder of Christmas, Ed Robb tells the story of little Misha, a boy living in a Russian orphanage who put not one but two Jesuses into his homemade Nativity set. The children living there had never heard about Jesus, and when, during Détente, an American named Will Fish went to Moscow to work with these children, they listened to the Christmas Story with amazement. Six year old Misha remembered it this way. When Will Fish discovered that Misha’s Nativity set had two Jesuses, Misha said to Will, *“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 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. So I asked Jesus, ‘If I keep you warm will that be a good enough gift?’ And Jesus told me, ‘that will be the best gift anybody ever gave me.’ So I got into the manger with him…”* Will Fish finishes his story by saying, “the little orphan had found someone who would never abandon or abuse him, someone who would stay with him for always.”

III

Friends, this holy season of Advent is a time for humility, for the re-kindling of a childlike faith in the One who emptied himself for us, being born in a manger within reach of rich and poor alike. He is the one who proclaimed God’s love and justice, who stooped to wash our feet, and who died offering us God’s forgiveness, as he took away our sin. What wondrous love is this? It begins with the wonder of the Manger: with Emmanuel—God-with-us. And as Jean Danilou writes in The Advent of Salvation,  *“…just as Christ was born according to the flesh in Bethlehem of Judah, so must he be born according to the spirit in each of our souls.”*

I leave you with this story, garnered from the City of Leipzig—the city of Bach—located in what used to be Communist East Germany. The University Church—St. Paul’s Church—dates back to 1231 when it was built to serve the Dominican monastery. After the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther himself inaugurated St. Paul’s as the University Church in 1545. It stood for over seven centuries, surviving the Napoleonic Wars when it was turned into a hospital and throughout World War Two when it was bombed repeatedly by the Allies.

But in 1968, when neighboring Czechoslovakia was rising up against the Communists, the University Church was dynamited by the East German regime in order to make room for the “Augustusplatz,” as it was to be named—which was really a way of sending a message of suppression to the spirited people of Leipzig. Many protestors were arrested, and twenty years passed. But then, in the fall of 1989, the people of Leipzig began to gather again in the Augustusplatz. They gathered for freedom, and they gathered in hope—even as the Stasi stood by with their black uniforms and their assault rifles, threatening them. By October, over 70,000 of them were gathered there, surrounded by 7000 soldiers armed with automatic weapons. They were chanting, “*Wir sind das Volk! Wir sind das Volk!”* which means, “We are the People!” And what began in the Augustusplatz in Leipzig began to spread throughout the land. By the end of the year, the Berlin Wall was torn asunder, and Germany became one nation again. And what did the Leipzigers do? In 1993 they rebuilt the University Church—St. Paul’s Church—remaking its original façade out of glass. And on the day of its dedication in 2009, the spirited performance of Bach’s Cantata “Nun Kom, der Heiden Heiland” meaning “Now Come, Savior of the Heathens” was a statement profound in and of itself.

Friends, now is the time and this is the way we all will renew and expand our hope for a better world. *Not by might, nor by power,* as Zechariah prophesied, *but by my Spirit, says the Lord of Hosts.* That Spirit still shows us that the power of God is made perfect in our weakness; and that through the wonder of the Manger, the reign of love and justice already has begun.

Let’s pray:

*Loving God, the glory of the world is passing. Your Word endures forever. May your Son, the Word-made-Flesh, be born again in us this Christmas, and like little Misha, may we hold him warm in our hearts.*

*Amen.*