

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
5:00, 8:00, and 11:00 p.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Eve of the Nativity; December 24, 2015

“A Manger will Suffice”

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20; Christmas A

When I was a baby, my mother used to stow me in the bathroom sink. Or sometimes in a little plastic pail that was just the right size for me to recline safely and soundly, my head resting against one corner with my feet cuddled up against the other. I've seen pictures; it looked pretty cozy.

My wife, Britton's, father tells her that he used to pull out a drawer in his dresser and nestle her tiny little form there, comfortably cushioned by his warm, clean clothes, where she would sleep and sleep quietly for hours.

My children first slept in a bassinet that I slept in when I was born, and my father when he was born, and his father when he was born.

I've seen babies nestled and sleeping soundly in prams, bouncy seats, laundry baskets, chest packs, doggy beds, high chairs, car seats, siblings' laps, and even occasionally in a church pew.

But a manger? A feeding trough for the common livestock? A smelly basket or bench of sorts surrounded by scuffled up mud and straw and... animal stuff? The residue of masticated grain and animal saliva incompletely smeared away in a hasty attempt to prepare a makeshift bed for a newborn? That I have never seen. Really, who makes this stuff up?

No, really? Who makes this up? Because either some imaginative story teller thought it would be entirely clever to present the Savior of the world in a feed trough instead of in the cushioned, velvety, and lavish cribs that awaited the babies born to the opulent kings in Jesus' day, or people just told the story as they remembered it, person to person, family to family, generation to generation... in which case nobody made it up. It just happened something like this, and the story was passed along. Oh, I know how that works over time, and stories get embellished, and pretty soon there are "cattle lowing" and "stars looking down" and visiting shepherds and kings to see a newborn baby that never cries. But this manger part... it's pretty spare, unembellished. All Luke says about this is "...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." That's it. In which case it perfectly expresses the truth of the humility of God incarnate born in a helpless,

tiny, homeless child! I, for one, believe the manger is real, a memory of the peculiar and difficult beginnings of life for Jesus and his family.

See, I don't believe the purpose of Christmas is to impress. I know we make a big to-do about it, and I earnestly believe we should celebrate and indulge a bit in these Holy Days. Get together, open your homes, sing songs and carols, share time with family and friends. Over the generations, we have learned to decorate our homes and churches and to give and receive gifts, a wonderful tradition that is based upon an expression of gratitude for the gift of God's love born to us in a tiny child. That warrants celebration.

But I don't think the Christmas story is to impress. Christmas is the revelation of the true and humble nature we believe belongs to the God of all Creation. It reminds us that that ordinary stuff of life is every bit as holy and sacred as those things we might call divine. Christmas is the night when angels of pristine heaven and shepherds of dirt and smelly animals have a mixer with each other. Christmas is when we remember that regal kings and simple working folk can cross paths and offer respect and dignity to one another. Christmas is when God reclines in the dust and the hay and the animal spit, and says, "This will do just fine."

Christmas is not intended to impress. Rather it is intended to inspire. You see, for all our efforts to chase down prosperity and grasp at least some modicum of control over our lives, avoiding illness, if we can, and death, which we ultimately cannot... the peace we crave in our hearts, salvation and rest for our souls, is neither to be found solely in riches, or status, or possessions, or “respectable” families, nor only in the contemplation of heaven, or in the sanitized confines of religion, or in the perfection of our behavior. Heaven and earth are joined. The holy and the ordinary are one. Salvation and goodness is quite happy to arrive in our ordinary lives through the common things of earth, through sharing food, giving fellowship and love, caring for children, working through the challenges of family life, being present for the sick, showing compassion for those that society would reject, sharing what we have with those who do not have. These are all things that the baby Jesus will leave his manger to encounter and to fulfill as a grown human being. Salvation and peace may be gifts by the grace of God, but we come to them through the ordinary stuff of life, through blood, through sweat, and yes, sometimes, through tears. Through our successes and through our failures. Through our faith and, maybe even sometimes, through our lack of it.

Christmas should inspire us to be more fully human, and thus more fully divine, a lot like that child whose birth we remember tonight. Oh, it was nothing special... but apparently it was everything special. It was in the middle of nowhere, but it mattered everywhere. There was no place to stay, but there was a place to be. It doesn't sound like it was comfortable, but it surely has become comforting. There was not even a bed, but there was a manger, a feed trough, and that was bed enough for God. Like an old plastic pail, or a bathroom sink, or a dresser drawer, or that place wherever your mother or your father or somebody first laid your tiny little head.