

Luke in Your Neighbourhood 3
Stable Child in an Unstable World.

Luke 2:1-20

All your life you have seen Nativity scenes, at Church Services, in the posh department store windows, on Church lawns, and on Christmas cards. Sometimes we see so many that they fade into the landscape. The faces of children surveying a Nativity window is a wonder to watch. I wonder, do we adults take such a scene for granted and miss its special wonder. This morning I want us use our own spiritual zoom lens and focus on three aspects of the nativity scene.

Firstly the Star above the Stable.

The Star - God provides a travel guide for seekers.

Believe it or not, the Bible tells us that God commissioned a particular star to serve as a kind of travel guide for a group of men from the east who had developed an interest in looking for the Christmas Child. Not only did that star lead these easterners to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem, but Matthew 2:9 says that the star led these wise men to the exact location of Joseph, Mary & Jesus. And when they finally located Him - they fell to their knees and worshipped Him and give Him costly gifts. These wise men rejoiced over the fact that God had provided them with a remarkably accurate travel guide. Deep down they knew they never would have found Christ without the star. The Christmas Star was God's gift of direction - God's travel guide for seekers.

So look at the Star differently: look at it as a symbol of the fact that God has always provided travel guides to earnest spiritual seekers: like you and me for instance? We were beginning to get interested in spiritual realities, we were confused, feeling lost, overwhelmed by the journey of discovery we were taking and then God provided a travel guide: someone to lead us to Christ. (Mum, Dad, Workmate, Teacher, Boys' Brigade officer, neighbour, friend, pastor....) All of us who are Christians can surely say, "Without that person, I

doubt I would ever have found Christ." God sent someone to cross our path. He sent someone whose light was bright. He sent someone whose love was real. He sent someone whose faith was so compelling that we found ourselves trusting that earthbound travel guide to lead us to Christ. Isn't Christmas an appropriate time to thank God for the gift of travel guides (earthbound stars) for where would we be now without their caring enough to be there for us.

Maybe in your more honest moments you would admit that you are still a seeker yourself: wandering in spiritual circles and not making much headway. So let me offer you a word of encouragement. Chances are that God has put a travel guide in your life somewhere already. Chances are, if you were to scan the horizons of your relationships, you probably already know someone whose spiritual light burns bright, whose love is real; whose faith has caught your attention more than once. Perhaps that's how you came to be here in the congregation at St Andrews today. That person may very well be God's gift to you - a Christmas Star - God's travel guide. You may say: God write me a ticker tape message in the sky over Canterbury High Street and you will have my full attention. But I say be careful and humble: let God determine the best way to lead you to His Son. The magi would probably have preferred a more personalised kind of guidance, but the point is that they were responsive to the guidance God provided. We should too, however it comes, through whomever it comes. Seekers I challenge you to do the same kind of thing during this Christmas. Identify the travel guide that God has already put in your life and get a conversation going with them. Ask your tough questions, express some of your deep doubts; initiate some interaction, a bit like Alpha. Maybe ask them to disciple you? But get on the road to finding Christ and someday you will be awfully glad you did. Look at the star - God has probably given you one. Use it soon.

Now refocus your zoom lens a little bit and look at the stable itself: ***The Stable - God sent Jesus to live in the Real World.*** The Stable Jesus was born in was anything but quaint!! It was like a thousand others, crowded with smelly animals, dark, damp, and rodent infested. It was an all round rotten place to birth a baby. Which makes a thinking person ask: "If God could commandeer a star to serve as a travel guide, why couldn't He commandeer a suite at the Bethlehem Hilton or at least a private room at a local hospital? The star is a much bigger deal than a suite would have been." The answer is that God could have, but made a deliberate choice not to. God chose a stable for His Son to be born in for a very important reason. You see, when God sent His Only Son to live on this earth, He made a strategic decision not to shelter Him from the harsh realities of life. God had no intention of shielding His Son by having Him born into the make-believe world of the rich and famous. God wanted His Son to experience life in its blue-collar boldness. Jesus' first breath of air burned with the odour of animal urine. The first noises He heard were the grunts of livestock. Jesus' first outfit was made of rags. From day one, God the Father determined not to shelter His Son from the rude, cruel realities of life on Planet Earth. Why? You ask: what was the purpose? Can insulated aristocrats relate to what you and I go through? They don't live like we live, eat like we eat, work like we have to work, and they don't suffer like we have to suffer from time to time. Think about someone like Nicolae Ceausescu in Romania and you will get the point. Take a good look at the Stable, friends. The stable is a permanent symbol of the fact that God sent Jesus to live in the real world. For our sake, Jesus was given no aristocratic advantage. He had humbler beginnings than any of us. He was born into a real family; He worked a real job during the first 30 years of his life, as a Carpenter, lived in a real neighbourhood, had real friends, suffered hardship and died a cruel death for a crime he didn't commit. So when the Bible

urges people who are going through disappointment and pain to pour out their hearts to the now ascended Saviour, we Christians can do so with absolute assurance that Jesus understands, He has been there. Life without advantage: He lived it! Shortage, poverty: He's been there. Discrimination, oppression: He was a refugee before His first birthday. Rejection: He experienced it. Ridicule: it was a part of His daily life. Abandonment: by lifelong friends in greatest time of need. Death of loved ones: multiple times. Physical pain: more than you or I will probably ever experience. Can you see how important the Stable is? It stands as a monument to the ability of Jesus to identify and sympathise with whatever we are going through. But we must be humble enough to pour our hearts out to Him and then allow Him to love and minister to us, and restore us to wholeness again. Well you have seen the star and the stable, so finally lets zoom in on the manger.

The Manger - the Ordinary becomes Extraordinary. This was not a posh crib: it was nothing more than a feed trough for cattle: a crudely constructed piece of farm furniture. The only reason we are even familiar with the term manger is this one verse of the Bible that says God's Son was laid in one. Apart from that we wouldn't have a clue as to what a manger was. But Jesus was laid in a manger, so look what happened to an ordinary piece of farm furniture. All of a sudden it has a new dignity: it's a household word, the ordinary becomes extraordinary: a feed trough for cattle becomes a cradle for a king. Quite a transformation I think you will agree! Look at the manger: it's a symbol of what can happen to an ordinary man or woman when Jesus Christ resides inside. It's a symbol of what has happened to millions of people around the world: ordinary people, run-of-the-mill suburban people, here, there and everywhere. Working, thinking, acting, relating people, until one day these ordinary people saw themselves for who they really

were: lawbreakers in God's eyes. They saw themselves as sinners: moral failures who didn't hide it and didn't tell themselves lies about it. These ordinary people came to realize that they couldn't change their past record and they probably weren't going to change their future conduct. They knew that they would be standing guilty on judgment day. So

First, they fell on their knees in repentance. They were just ordinary people saying, "O God, I see who I am. I see your holiness, and I know I've fallen short. I repent, Lord; on my knees I repent!"

Second, they fell on their knees to cry out for grace. They pleaded for the grace that only God can give through His Son, the Christmas child, who was born to die for the sins of the world.

Third, they fell to their knees in worship to Jesus when they realized that salvation had been granted and forgiveness had been afforded them. Their record had been dealt with, and reconciliation with God had become a reality. They were now adopted, forgiven, and brought into the family of God as sons and daughters. That's cause for a time of worship on bended knee.

Ordinary people fell on their knees and cried out, "O God thank you for Jesus. Thank you for who He was and what He did for me." When Jesus takes up residency, by His Spirit, in an ordinary life, I can assure you the ordinary gives way to the extraordinary. Just as a feed trough becomes a Kings cradle, a very average man or woman becomes exceptional through responsiveness to God.

When he was once only a people pleaser, a man now becomes concerned about giving God pleasure. Where she was once self-absorbed, a woman now becomes exceptional in love for other people, in thoughtfulness, generosity, tenderness and purity. You see, God does to human beings what Jesus did to the manger. He makes something that was ordinary extraordinary.

What about you? Will you allow Jesus to bring about that kind of transformation in your life, if He hasn't already?

Wherever you go at Christmas, Nativity Scenes still abound: when you pass one in your car or walking, look at the star (God provides guides for earnest seekers), look at the stable (God decided not to shelter His Son: so He is a sympathetic Saviour who understands), and look at the manger (an ordinary piece of farm furniture transformed into a Kings cradle).

You know your choice is simple: stand and watch or fall down on your knees in repentance and then in worship. Which will you choose this Christmas?

Pastor David

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