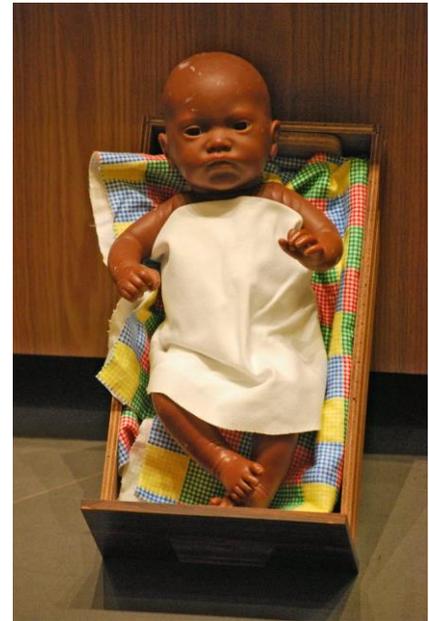


I have been pondering for the last few months about the manger, that place in which Mary and Joseph placed the newborn Christ Child. I have been thinking about the manger for two reasons. First, the manger Church of the Resurrection owned was accidentally destroyed on a Last Saturday Food Distribution day some months before we moved from our building to make way for affordable housing and a new church. I have been pondering whether we need, at some point, to acquire a new manger.

Then, too, there's Baby A. Born premature, just two pounds, he was "failing to thrive." That's what the doctors called it, "failure to thrive." Of course, this might have been because he had no food, had no diapers, and was sleeping in a dresser drawer. One of our members discovered this through a school social worker and Resurrection sprang into action: we bought the baby food, diapers, Desatin, and a crib. I am happy to report Baby A is now thriving; he weighed eight pounds at last report. All this happened right around the time when our manger was destroyed, though, and these two incidents have been causing me to think about mangers.



Being veterans of Christmases past and custodians of the Christ story, I am sure you know a manger is a bin, a container, from which animals are fed. I called Chris Y. earlier today and asked if I could borrow one of her mangers. She told me she doesn't have a dog dish big enough for our Baby Jesus. Maybe one of you have a big enough manger and would let us borrow it next year.

Mary and Joseph placed the newborn Christ Child into a manger because they were homeless travelers with no place where the baby could sleep. Little did they know on THAT day the baby would one day become food for the whole world.

No, THAT came later, much later. THIS day was a day of rejoicing: The child was born. The child was in a manger. All was quiet THERE. No "It came upon a midnight clear." No "Joy to the world" bursting out in heavenly song. Just a whispered "Silent night, holy night" and a crooned "Away in a manger."

Did you notice where the rejoicing occurred? Not in or near the manger. Not in or above Bethlehem. Instead, the music burst out of the heavens over a nearby flock of sheep. I never understood why, until now—if the Christ Child was in a manger in Bethlehem—why all creation burst into song over sheep.

Well, turns out, these weren't just ANY sheep. They were the unblemished lambs being raised as sacrifice for the redemption of sins. I'll bet even the SHEEP rejoiced at this child's birth. THEIR relief, their redemption, was at hand, as well as ours!

We don't hear about the sheep in the telling of this event, though. Instead, the story focuses on the shepherds who were at first afraid, and then motivated, to undertake a new life's mission: Go find the Christ Child. He's in a manger in Bethlehem.

Theirs wasn't a year-long discernment effort followed by four years of plans and approvals. No, the angels simply told the shepherds where to find the Christ Child in Bethlehem, exactly where the prophets had foretold the Messiah could come. Christ's only home, though, was a manger.

Notice the angels didn't say "Go," just "here's where to find Christ, should you seek him." The shepherds themselves decided among themselves, "Let us now [go] see this thing that has taken place." Let us find the manger.

We are left to ponder whether the shepherds knew what they were doing.

- Did they know they had been given a new life's mission?
- Did they understand they were leaving a flock-full of unblemished sacrifices behind for a once-for-all new-and-totally-improved version?
- Did they acknowledge, even to themselves, just how unlikely emissaries they were for this task?
- Did they worry no one would know about the Messiah's birth if they did not go, or if they kept silent?
- Did they understand that, having found the Christ Child, THEY became the manger? Yes, that's my thesis: WE each are the manger now; we are the home Christ has here on Earth.

But—thank the heavenly hosts and thank God—they shepherds proved up to the task. They went. They found the manger and its eternity-changing contents: the Christ Child! They realized the significance of what they had been told and had seen, and they told absolutely everyone, praising God.

I wonder why the angels hadn't visited the priests. I wonder if they had, would the priests have gone to the manger and rejoiced and told anyone at all. Or would they have maintained the status quo?

But all this is very ancient history, in a sense. The shepherds proved themselves to be the optimal ones to have told the world about the events of that first Christmas. The shepherds were not who WE might have chosen, but they proved able to discern the full meaning of "this thing that had taken place," as our gospel lesson says.

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Which makes me wonder if WE have successfully deduced the significance of “this thing that has taken place?” Have we, like the shepherds, gone in search of the manger, in search of the Christ Child in the manger?

We at Church of the Resurrection were visited by a heavenly host of angels. They sang a glorious song, a song about a child being born among us, a child with no home, no clothes, and no place to be except in a place not fit for a person. The angels sang a song of joy and love and hope, and they pointed the way, the way to find the Christ Child, the Christ Child in the manger. And so, we reasoned among ourselves, “Let us go see this thing that has taken place.”

Which is why we are away from OUR home, in search of the place in which the Christ Child has come among us. What we will discover on this journey is the very going, our accepting the task given us, will allow us to discover that **WE are the manger**, the very place in which the Christ Child is born. If we make room for him there. If we recognize that others will come seeking the Christ Child in the manger within us. If we praise God for choosing us as his home and tell others how to be Christ’s manger, too.

For tonight, though:

FEAR NOT, for behold I bring you Good News of great joy for all people:

Unto us a child is born,

**O come, let us adore him.**