

Introduction:

- A. The angel said to the shepherds, *“I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.”* Then this: ***“This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”*** Why do you think the angel told them that? So that they wouldn’t get the wrong baby? Wouldn’t it have been easier to direct them to the stable than the manger?
- B. We start today with that word *sign*: “This will be a *sign to you.*” In the Bible signs don’t just direct traffic. Signs in the Bible poke you in the ribs and whisper, *“Do you get it?”* In the Bible signs are signals, messages; they *mean* something for those who pay attention. The shepherds go looking for a baby who *“is the Messiah, the Lord,”* and they find him *“lying in a manger.”* I’d assume that, like most newborns, the baby Jesus spent most of his time lying in his mother’s arms but they would find him lying in a manger. What do you make of that? What’s that *mean*?
- C. We read about the serious hassles faced by Joseph and Mary. Forced by a census instigated by far-away Rome to leave Nazareth and travel all the way to Bethlehem, and that with Mary being nine months pregnant. Then getting there and finding *“no room in the inn.”* Our response is, *That’s not what should happen.* We shake our heads and think, *what kind of world is this where the Lord himself finds no welcome?*
- D. Christ’s birth in a barn was nobody’s fault. The angel didn’t conclude his stunning good news with a shining shrug, *“Unfortunately, the world being the wicked, cold-hearted place it is, the only place God could find for him was a manger.”* That the baby Jesus was laid in a manger is a good thing! A God thing! It’s a sign.
- E. In fact, that setting—that *sign*—is more wondrous and wise than the star that caught the eye of the wise men. It speaks more wonderfully than the angel’s announcement and choir. That manger was a more suitable birthplace for this

king than any palace or temple. It was the perfect place for Christ's birth. It is a *sign*—a poke in the ribs and the whispered question, *what kind of king chooses to be presented in the haystack of a barn?* It is the glory of God in the lowest.

- I. **THE SIGN OF THE MESSIAH IN THE MANGER TELLS US THAT HE WILL BE AT HOME AMONG THE LEAST OF US**
- A. Shepherds wouldn't have known what to do with themselves if the angel had sent them to the palace in Jerusalem, or even to the court of the temple. But they were at home in a barn. This wasn't their first manger and it wasn't the first time they'd crowded into a warm stable. It is a significant part of this sign that lowly shepherds found this child on their turf, in their kind of place.
- B. Luke takes time throughout his gospel to show how Jesus related to the poor. Remember Jesus' parable of the master who throws a great banquet only to have his invitations rebuffed by those on his guest list? He was angry at their rejection of him and his generous invitation so he told his servant, "*Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.*" Those were Jesus' kind of people. Remember when Jesus was criticized by religious leaders for eating with unsavory people. That's when Jesus told his stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son and his graceless older brother.
- C. The stable and manger are symbols—*signs*—of the lowly, dirty places where Jesus finds people, where he befriends people, where he saves people. He began his Sermon on the Mount, "*Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kingdom of God.*" It isn't that poor people are more deserving. It's simply that they must come to Jesus empty-handed. And he didn't just mean those who didn't have two nickels to rub together. He meant spiritual paupers whose hearts were penniless. The only people Jesus can save are those who know how desperately poor they are. They are inducted into *The Royal Order of the Manger.*

II. THE SIGN OF THE MESSIAH IN THE MANGER TELLS US THAT HE WILL SHOW US GOD AS WE'VE NEVER SEEN HIM BEFORE

- A. Any vision or view of God in the Old Testament was terrifying. “*High and lifted up and the train of his robe filled the temple.*” I don’t think the shepherds grasped that this baby—in a manger, of all things—was God in the flesh! How could they have understood that? But the Lord born in a manger was the sign of something extraordinary described for us in **Phil 2: Christ Jesus:**

*Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be
used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!*

- B. The Lord Jesus, found as a baby in a manger, was our first glimpse of this. Look again at what the Son of God did: “He made himself nothing.” He emptied himself of all his divine prerogatives and rights. Notice *he* did this. It was *his* choice and *his* action, his initiative--the King laying aside robe and crown and scepter, relinquishing his omniscience and omnipotence and omnipresence till he was empty of all but his godliness. Wesley put it, “*emptied himself of all but love.*”

Then, having divested himself of his divine rights, “he took the very nature of a servant.” God had always served his people but here we have a new kind of *person*. None of us have the *very nature of a servant*. Far from it! But the Son of God, come in flesh, saw everything through the eyes of a loving, selfless servant. *What can I do to love? To help?* No price too high. No service too lowly. Love lowered the Son of God to serve us.

Then that Christmas phrase: “being made in human likeness.” The Second Person of the Triune God dressed in DNA and molecules, in skin and bone, in blood, sweat and tears. A baby swaddled tightly in cloths. I wonder what he weighed: 6 lbs 5 oz? 7 lbs 14 oz? 21” maybe. Look at that head of dark hair! Those brown eyes. *“Mary, did you know, when you kissed your little baby, you kissed the face of God!”*

Then this: “And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross.” It is Jesus’ complete obedience to God that is the third astonishing feature here of his self-emptying. He *is* God. He doesn’t obey anyone because he naturally knows the right thing to do in all cases. *Who can instruct, let alone command, the Lord?* But he laid aside all that ‘inside knowledge.’ Nine times in the Gospel of John Jesus says things like, *“The Son can do nothing by Himself”* [Jn 5:19], *“I do nothing without consulting the Father”* [Jn 5:30], *“For I have come down from heaven to do the will of God who sent Me, not to do what I want”* [Jn 6:38]. There is the human being we all were meant to be like—constantly and utterly obedient to God at every moment, with every word. And that obedience was so complete that he even died in obedience to the Father.

- C. Finding the Lord Jesus **lying in a manger** was our first sign of what the Son of God had become, emptied of his divine rights, confined to human flesh, committed to utter selfless obedience to the Father, all so that he might serve as a ransom for us, that we might come to God.

III. THE SIGN OF THE MESSIAH IN THE MANGER GIVES US OUR FIRST GLIMPSE OF THE KINGDOM TO COME

- A. Later, it would be the magi who came to see the child.

Contrary to the pictures we always see, he was no longer in a manger. In fact, their coming was a different sign—a sign of his royalty. You remember what they asked King Herod, *“Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”*

Then when they found the child, “*they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.*” Now that’s more like it! Maybe he was laid in a lowly manger at the beginning but he’s destined for glory. Phil. 2 certainly confirms that. In response to Jesus’ obedient death on the cross, it says:

*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

- B. Then the manger will be a remnant of the past, right? Jesus, King of kings and Lord of lords, will reign from his great sapphire throne over his vast and glorious Kingdom. No more manger!
- C. Recently I came upon a passage I’d forgotten. In Luke 12 Jesus tell a parable to his disciples to prepare them for their work. He said,

“Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes.”

That tells us that there are no more important preparations in life than that we his people are alert and waiting for Jesus to come back. But it was the next verse that I’d forgotten:

Truly I tell you, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. My first thought in reading that was that painting we have in the foyer by Ford Madox Brown of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. Their astonishment is what you see. Well, if *that* was astonishing, how much more to be at the wedding supper of the Lamb and then see Jesus, our great and glorious Bridegroom, lay aside his royal robes, put on an apron, and *wait on us!*

I thought about that a long time and began to realize that when we see Jesus **1 John** tells us we will be like him. In other words, I don't think we'll be shocked to see Jesus wait on us because it will be the most natural thing in the *new* world. Jesus never gives up his nature as a servant. So heaven will be a kingdom of service *and* of the humility that characterized Jesus here. In God's kingdom, not even the Lord himself will lord it over others. Even such a thought would be foreign. *Who would do such a thing when we could serve instead!?*

- D. I thought of that amazing idea as I looked at the Lord Jesus in the manger. Jesus did not step out of character to be born in such a lowly way. On the contrary, **the manger is a sign to us of his royal pedigree, his regal way.** This is how things are in the Kingdom of God. The greatest in the kingdom of heaven is the servant of all. The baby Messiah, found lying in a manger, is our first signal of that wonder!
- E. **Glory to God in the Lowest!**