

Bethany Presbyterian Church
24 December 2017 – Fourth Sunday in Advent

Luke 2:7

God of the prophets, God of consuming fire, Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; in your covenant faithfulness send forth the fire of your Holy Spirit to accompany the reading and hearing of your Holy Word; that your truth and righteousness may be emblazoned upon our hearts. Set our souls on fire with a holy passion, that we may offer ourselves as living sacrifices of obedience and praise to you, the one and only True and Living God; through Jesus Christ who is our eternal prophet, priest, and King.
Amen.

THE MANAGER-MAKER

The sun was setting over ancient Palestine, as it had done so many times before, when the wife of the manger-maker walked to the door of the little workshop in the back of the house, as she had done so many times before, to tell her husband that the evening meal was ready. Occasionally she would pause, as she was then doing, to observe her husband deeply engrossed in his work.

As she watched him moving around amidst the evening shadows of the setting sun, she took note of his full beard and head of hair which seemed to turn more grey with each passing day. When he raised his hammer and brought it down accurately and forcefully upon its intended object, she noticed the large veins protruding from his arms and neck, and the muscles in his strong arms which had been preserved by years of physical work and conditioning.

She could remember when his hair had been red as the rays of the setting sun, which was casting its final light for that day upon the earth and was bathing the little workshop in an amber glow. She could remember when the veins were not so prominent in his hands and the muscle tone in his arms was even more sleek. How she loved this man! Theirs had been a good marriage and the years had gone by quickly.

The wife allows herself the luxury of remembering when she had been a fair damsel and had been attracted to this young lad, whom she had met one day as she accompanied her mother to the village well. She had seen him there with his mother. His

finger was bleeding. Someone had left a broken water pitcher by the well and he had tried to rearrange the pieces together. He had cut himself with one of the jagged edges of the broken pottery.

For as long as she had known him, he had loved to fix things and work with his hands. What had started out as curiosity about things that could be carved from wood or made with stone had turned into a skill and then into a career. The manger-maker had become a master craftsman and had become known throughout the region for the quality of his work. He believed his work represented him, so he always tried to do it well. He was never out of work because his customers always came back. There were others who could do faster work and possibly fancier work but no one could do any better work. In addition to the constant work from old customers, there were always new customers who had heard of the old manger-maker's skill and would come from near and far with work to be done.

As his wife observed him and reflected on their life together, he looked up with a twinkle in his eyes. The twinkle was always there when he looked at her, even after all these years. He asked, "Is it supper time already?" "Yes," she replied, "Time to wash up and come to eat. By the way, what are you working on so intently? Anything special?"

"No," he said, "just another manger. Reuben, who owns an inn down in Bethlehem, needs another manger. This new decree from Caesar Augustus, requiring everyone to return to their hometown to register for the census, has brought an unusual amount of business to Bethlehem and to Reuben's inn this year. He was telling me that he stays full just about all the time. He needs another manger for his guest's animals. This is no special project; it's just another manger."

The old workman soon finished the manger and inspected it, confident that he had done his usual quality job. This was far from being the first manger he had made and hopefully it would not be his last. Since he put his best effort into all of his work, this manger, from his perspective, was just another manger.

It wasn't necessary for the innkeeper who received the manger to inspect it too closely because he knew that the manger-maker didn't do shoddy work. The innkeeper knew the insides would be hallowed out deep enough to hold sufficient hay and feed for cattle and other animals who would eat from it. He knew that there would be no cracks in its bottom or sides which would allow water to seep in. He knew the manger would be strong enough to take the kicking and scraping from the hooves of the animals who would use it. This was not the first manger the innkeeper had ordered from the manger-maker and hopefully it would not be his last. So for the innkeeper it was just another manger.

Just another manger; that's probably what the maintenance men at the Bethlehem inn thought as they carried it to the stable behind the inn and found a convenient place for the feeding of animals.

Just another superstitious Hebrew; that's probably what Pharaoh thought when Moses first showed up at his court with the command that God's people be set free. *Just another meddling woman who had gotten out of her place;* that's probably what Sisera and his generals thought when they first heard that the prophetess Deborah was giving courage to the armies of Israel. *Just another preacher trying to make trouble. We'll intimidate him and buy him off like we've done all the rest;* that's probably what Ahab and Jezebel thought of Elijah when he declared that the rains would come only at his word.

Just another Indian; that's probably what the British thought when Mahatma Gandhi first told them to go home and leave India to the Indians.

We must be careful about how we dismiss and take lightly those who have been made by the Master Crafter. Never sell yourself short. Never dismiss yourself as being a nobody with nothing special to offer. Recognize the fact that you have been made by the Master Crafter.

Others may treat us as just another employee, another student, another woman, but we are the work of the Master Crafter. We are "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people" (I Peter 1:9). Though we may look ordinary, God has suited us in our ordinariness for the purposes that we are to serve. Our insides have been hollowed out so that they can hold hearts to love God, minds to serve God, spirits that long for God, and souls to live eternally with God. God has given us the blood of Jesus to seal in the cracks in our lives so no sin can seep in to destroy what we are within. We are strengthened by God to withstand the kicks and bruises that others - Satan and life itself - give to us. We are the work of the Master Crafter.

Making mangers was not a particularly noteworthy calling. However, it was the manger-maker's calling and so he did his best. He didn't allow others to belittle his talents. He was proud of his work and so he did his best.

No matter how many or how few, how great or how small your talents, if they are your talents, always put forth your best effort. No matter how great or how small your contribution when it is your time to give, give with thanksgiving, with pride, and with style. No matter how great or small the occasion when it is your time to perform, give it your all.

We have no need to be jealous of another's task or talent. All we have to do is strive for excellence in that which is ours to do.

The manger-maker had no way of knowing the special use to which his manger would be put. Thank God that he was consistent at producing his best. Thank God that the manger into which the baby Jesus was laid was among the manger-maker's best efforts. Heaven forbid that our Lord would have lain in a manger that proved insufficient for its unexpected blessing. Heaven forbid that Jesus, who was born in the meanest, poorest, and crudest of circumstances, would have been laid in a manger of shoddy materials and poor workmanship.

We ought to always put forth our best efforts because we never know when God will have some special use for our talent, our witness or testimony, or our life. We never know when we will be needed to fill a specific place, serve a special role, or be a unique part of God's larger plan of redemption. We ought to always put forth our best effort for we never know when God will visit our lives.

Thank God that Abraham was consistently courteous to strangers. On that day when he saw two strangers approaching his tent, he received them with his usual courtesy. He didn't realize it, but those two ordinary-looking men were angels on their way to Sodom and Gomorrah to deliver God's word of judgment. Because Abraham extended his best self, he received the assurance that God's word would still come true. His wife, Sarah, though far beyond child-bearing years, would still give him a son, and Abraham would be the father of a great nation.

It always pay to put forth our best because we never know when heaven will descend upon our lives in search of our best. That's why Jesus told the disciples: "Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day the Lord is coming" (Matthew 24:42).

On the night Jesus was born, a manger had a place in the drama of salvation. Who would have thought at this particular time and place in history the God of the universe would have used something as insignificant as a manger? Who would have thought at such an important point in time, on such a momentous occasion as the coming of the long-awaited Messiah, something as simple and as small as a manger would have such a prominent role?

One could conceive of God using the forces of nature. God had used rain in the time of Noah and fire in the time of Moses. During the Egyptian bondage God used all kinds of natural plagues to free the children of Israel. God sent the whirlwind for Elijah and God would use the stars to guide the wise men to the baby Jesus. Throughout the Scriptures the mighty forces of nature are used to accomplish God's will, but who would have thought that God would have needed and used something as small and as simple, but as important in the place and at that time, as a mere manger.

One would expect the involvement of human beings in the drama of salvation. One would expect prophets to foretell of a coming Messiah. In the event of a child's birth, one would expect the involvement of human parents. One would not even be surprised to learn of holy people like Simeon and Anna celebrating the Messiah's coming. One could conceive of visitors, even shepherds, coming to see him. When one considers that Jesus comes to challenge and rebuke the hold of Satan and sin on human life and destiny, one is not surprised to find an evil Herod plotting to destroy him. But who would have expected

God to have needed and used something as simple and as small, but as important in that place and in that time, as a mere manger?

One is not surprised to see the involvement of angels. After all, throughout the Scriptures angels are associated with God's special communication with us. Since God used angels when he spoke in various ways in times past to our mothers and fathers, it would be expected that angels would be involved when God was communicating with us through a Son whom he had appointed heir of all things and through whom God also created the world. With the coming of God in Jesus one would expect to hear angels singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men and [women] with whom God is well pleased" (Luke 2:14). Angels and the baby Jesus just naturally go together. However, what one would not expect is the involvement of something as simple and as small but as important, at that time and place, as a manger, in this, the greatest story ever told.

However, at that time and in that place, nothing but a manger would do because the baby Jesus needed some place to lay his head. Mary and Joseph and the others would not have been able to hold him all the time. The baby Jesus would have been constantly shifted from person to person. The ground would have been too hard and cold for him. The forces of nature - fire, wind, and rain - would not have been able to cushion the head of Jesus. Angel's music, while sweet, was not designed to be a resting place for a baby's head. Since cribs are not found in stables, the only thing that could serve that purpose was something as simple as the feeding trough of the stable animals - the manger.

If God can use something as simple and as small as a manger, then God can use you and me. We may not be able to sing like the angels and we may not be able to preach like Paul, but if God can use something as simple and as small as the manger, God can use you and me. There may be others better qualified, with more energy and strength, with more money and influence, but God is big enough to use something small like the manger of a good craftsman, since we have been made by the Master Crafter, God can use you and me.

As unbelievable as it may seem, maybe what God needs in a particular situation, to reach a particular person, is not somebody else but you or me. Maybe somebody needs to hear us tell our story - as only we can - of how Jesus lifted us from sinking sand. Maybe somebody who "Knew us when" needs to see the change that Jesus has made in our lives. Every now and then we can be God's mangers - serving a special purpose in special situations at special times.

It was just another manger; that's probably what everyone thought as they dealt with the manger in which Jesus was laid. How could they possibly know that the God of the universe had a special purpose for that manger? How could they know that something far more precious than fodder for cattle or feed for animals would lay in that manger? How could they know that the manger would be the first resting place for God's unspeakable gift? How could they know that the angels would sing over that manger? How could they know that that manger, which looked so ordinary, would be unlike any other manger that had ever been made? How could they know that such an ordinary manger would hold such an extraordinary treasure? How could they know that after two thousand years we are still talking about, singing about, and preaching about that manger.

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed, the little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head.
The stars in the bright sky looked down where he lay, the little Lord Jesus, asleep
on the hay.

LET US PRAY

God Almighty, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father, and Holy Spirit always beyond us but ever within, to you in the highest be all glory and praise! We walk in darkness, but we have seen a great light. We dwell in the land of the shadow of death, but upon us the bright flame has descended. How good are your tidings, how great their joy! Yet how silent of old was the coming of your Son – how unforeseen in Bethlehem was the King foretold by the seers, how incongruous at Nazareth was the Prince of Peace extolled by the prophets. You are so often courteous in your insistence, tender in your mightiness, patient in your thunder. Are you to come again in these days of Advent, or have you come already and come again is such a stealth that we have not seen or not understood what we saw? Keep us awake, we beseech you, alert for signs of your Holy intrusion. Open our minds, unseal our hearts, unclench our souls, and suffuse our bodies with strength sufficient for the unexpected burdens of your nearness; and should a lowly place be once again the site of your lodging, grant us not to be blind to your splendor or deaf to your pleading. Lord, have mercy on us for the sparseness of substance that locks out the hurts of your people around us, for the coldness of being that feels not the cold of our sisters and brothers, for the corruption of spirit that repulses the knock of the needy. Preserve us from such reluctance to pity that we become ourselves pitiful. Let not cheapness in loving turn our whole lives into cheapness. Extend our perceptions, enlarge our affections, and prepare us for the manger that we are ready for the cross. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray: "Our Father . . ." Amen.