

Property of Rev. Kathy A. Tessin and First Presbyterian Church, Port Huron
No reuse or duplication without written permission.

Christmas Eve – December 24, 2025 5:00 p.m.

Sermon Text

Luke 2: 1-20 (Revised Geneva Translation)

1 And it happened in those days that there came a decree from Augustus Caesar that all the world should be registered. 2 (This first registration was made when Quirinius was Governor of Syria.) 3 Therefore, all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. 4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee (out of a city called Nazareth) into Judea (to the city of David - which is called Bethlehem - because he was of the House and lineage of David) 5 to register with Mary (his betrothed), who was with child. 6 And so it was that while they were there, the days were completed that she should be delivered. 7 And she brought forth her first begotten Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a **feeding trough** (because there was no room for them in the inn).

8 And there were in that same country, shepherds, abiding in the field, and keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And lo, the Angel of the Lord came upon them. And the Glory of the Lord shone about them. And they were very afraid. 10 Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid! For behold, I bring you glad tidings of great joy, which shall be to all the people. 11 "For to you is born this day in the City of David, a Savior, Who is

Christ the Lord. 12 “And this shall be a sign to you - you shall find the Baby swaddled and laid in a **feeding trough.**”

13 And immediately, there was with the Angel a multitude of Heavenly soldiers, praising God, and saying, 14 “Glory to God in the High Heaven! Peace on Earth, and to man, according to His good pleasure!” 15 And it came to pass, when the angels had gone away from them into Heaven, the shepherds said one to another, “Let us go to Bethlehem, then, and see this thing which has happened, which the Lord has shown to us.”

16 So they came quickly, and found both Mary and Joseph, and the Baby laid in the **feeding trough.**

17 And when they had seen it, they made known the thing which was told to them about that Child. 18 And all who heard it, marveled at the things which were told to them by the shepherds. 19 But Mary preserved all those sayings and pondered them in her heart. 20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen as it was spoken to them.

Sermon Title: “Where are You Pointed?”

Children singing: “Away in a feeding trough”??

Something is off with that translation; the only words that sound right with that carol are “Away in a manger.” Besides the fact the syllables don’t fit into the stanza of this beloved Christmas carol very well, feeding trough makes it sound, well

... smelly, dirty, unhygienic. Feeding trough makes it sound like you really would hear cattle mooing, goats bleating; it really does sound like rough wood and scratchy hay. It doesn't sound very peaceful and comforting.

In my family, a newborn baby arrived in August, and a grandniece is scheduled to arrive January 4th. And in both situations, the expectant couples had baby showers and prepared for where the baby would be bathed, fed, rocked, and laid down to sleep peacefully, with only a baby monitor guarding over its slumber. But on the night of Jesus' birth, we hear of preparation interrupted, a difficult trip in the last days of this completely unexpected pregnancy, to a crowded village where there wasn't enough space for everyone coming into town.

Surely Joseph wasn't the only person left from the lineage of David that had to go back to King David's birthplace of Bethlehem to be counted. There must have been some distant family connection still living in that village. Maybe a second cousin twice removed. Maybe someone who was from the family of a childhood friend of Joseph's grandfather. Because, even in a culture where hospitality was almost sacred, even if they weren't blood related, someone let them in to get out of the cold, cleared some space where a woman in labor could give birth.

Scripture doesn't say the child was born in a stable. It says the child was laid in a manger. And so we assume in our modern, Western minds that this was a shelter meant only for animals, away from where people lived. However, in the ancient Middle East, animals were usually kept in a lower level of a house to protect them from wild animals or human theft. Sometimes the feeding trough was part of an opening between the human living space and the space where the animals stayed for the night. So in crowded space, the newborn just delivered could be laid in this box, made into protected space by lining it with some clean hay, some cloth strips to wrap the newborn infant in for warmth and comfort – in this possible scenario, the feeding trough isn't as much of an unclean option.

What was considered dirty were the visitors that arrived that night – the shepherds. Jewish rabbis had banned shepherds in these years from testifying in the courts of the time, because they were considered dirty, unclean – their testimony wasn't to be trusted. These jobs were filled by people on the margin of society – or, they were youngest sons in very large families like the young King David. Sheep tending required the tenders to take the flocks far away from the villages and towns to find new pastures of grass and growth for the sheep to feed upon. It was an isolating life. And so in the gospel of Luke, we again see a disconnect – not only is this new king going to be born of a young woman, the last woman you

would expect to mother a future king. The first people to hear the announcement of the Christ Child's birth are outcasts, outsiders.

In Luke's account of the birth of Jesus, the manger – the feeding trough – is a really important point, and is pointing to something. In this birth story, the word is used three (3) times. Mentioning something in threes has special importance in the Bible: think of the 3 wise men from Matthew's account; the 3 temptations Christ faced in the wilderness; and the 3 times Jesus asked Peter "do you love me?" The number three gives emphasis; it can also represent divine wholeness, completeness, or perfection. So what is Luke telling us by pointing to the manger with this repetition? What does he want us to really see?

The answer is this: the manger was a sign, specifically for the shepherds. We kind of mash together the story of the wise men and the star that guided them to find the newborn Christ child, and connect it to the shepherds. So we picture the shepherds in our mind leaving the glory of the Lord they experienced with the visit from the angelic chorus, and picture them looking for a star over the place the newborn Christ child is staying. But that's not what the Bible says; a star is not what God gave the shepherds as a sign. "And this shall be a sign to you - you shall find the Baby swaddled and laid in a manger." The feeding trough was the sign to them that they had located

the correct child the angels were singing about, the child the angels proclaimed was “born this day in the City of David, a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord.”

And so in Luke’s third time mentioning the manger: “... (the shepherds) came quickly, and found both Mary and Joseph, and the Baby laid in the manger. And when they had seen it, they made known the thing which was told to them about that Child.” The manger pointed the shepherds to the right family. The manger was their sign that what the angels had said was true – a Child had been born for us that day. The manger was their sign pointing them to the new life that would give this world new life.

Mary was told by the angel Gabriel who this child was. Joseph had hints of it from a dream. But now these shepherds, who were literal outsiders in their society, were the first to be told outside of this tiny family who this child was – Immanuel, God-with-Us. And it wasn’t the manger that was important. The manger was just a signpost, a directional arrow, God’s GPS coordinate to identify the child. The point Luke is making is clear with outcast shepherds and feeding troughs: the birth of this child is the beginning of a major change, a confrontation between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world. The kingdoms of the world give off the appearance of riches, power, strength, and influence. The kingdoms of the world encourage us to worship the material things of the world, and

the illusion of power and control that human leaders claim to hold. But the Kingdom of God is very different. On its surface, with its King's birth, it has the appearance of weakness, vulnerability, insignificance. Caesar Augustus probably never knew there were little villages of Bethlehem and Nazareth – he definitely never heard of Jesus of Nazareth. But within 100 years Caesar Augustus' successors in Rome heard of Jesus and were feeling so threatened by his followers that they took steps to obliterate them. How did this turn around so quickly? The shepherds took what was pointed out to them, and took that opportunity to share the good news of the Christ Child. After being pointed in the right direction, they in turn began pointing that direction to anyone they encountered.

Just like the incongruity of being pointed to a baby laying in a feeding trough, just like the incongruity of people on the margins of society being the first to have the Kingdom of God revealed to them, God is revealed to us in the incongruities of life. God gives us signs. They are in the moments that catch us, make us pause, make us stop to reflect on something outside of ourselves, bigger than ourselves. The moments where a still, small voice nudges us into realizing something different is going on. It may be the birth of a new life in your own family and the awe it always brings. It may be a spectacular sunset; a rainbow in the sky. Signs come from unexpected acts of generosity directed toward you, a kind word from a stranger. God's

presence can be pointed to in a repeated phrase coming from different sources, that makes you say “Wait a minute – why do I keep hearing this?” These incongruous things point us to God, are the signs that help us see God in our lives.

When we see a manger – on a Christmas card, on a bulletin – we don’t just look at it as a poor excuse for a crib. We don’t just see the feeding trough it was originally created to be. We’ve had the good news shared with us, and so we know where the manger points. It points to the truth of the true King, the true Savior, that was promised from so long ago and gives us our release from the sins of the world, gives us hope of eternal life. The manger points us to God-with-us today, the movement of the Holy Spirit acting through those that share the good news in their thoughts, words and deeds. The manger points us to our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Tonight, see where the manger is pointing our vision – to the table of grace on the other side. On this holy night, let your focus shift. And not just for tonight, but in the days to come. Where is your attention pointed to? Do you see the signs God gives you of His presence everyday? Stop. Pause. Listen. See where God is pointing you. Amen.

Property of Rev. Kathy A. Tessin and First Presbyterian Church, Port Huron
No reuse or duplication without written permission.