

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2021

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Mary laid the baby in a manger.

Luke, whose nativity story is rich with meaningful detail, tells us that Mary wrapped her newborn baby in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger.

This young woman, who had said yes to the angel Gabriel just months prior, when he delivered her life-altering news, news that could very well have brought shame upon her, she laid her baby in a manger.

This woman, whose labor had no doubt begun on the road, who likely had walked miles, having to stop at increasingly short intervals to hunch over, hands on her knees, or to lean into Joseph while the contractions washed over her entire body, this young woman laid her baby in a manger.

She and Joseph had been offered a stable. No room at the inn. Everyone was traveling to Jerusalem for that pesky census, a decree from the emperor whose rule had been more than just pesky. It has been brutal. Oppressive. And so they went, together. A family now, with a baby on the way.

The rooms were all booked. The inns all a-clang and a-clatter with the noise of weary travelers, grateful for a meal, for company.

The stable was at least private and quiet, save for the occasional braying of a donkey, the harumph and sigh of an ox.

The animals created some warmth, the heat of their bodies radiating in the small enclosure. Steam escaped in puffs from their wet noses, droplets glittering against the darkness.

There was a manger, of course, a trough where these animals were fed. And Mary laid her baby in it.

This detail has stuck with me for the better part of Advent, as our Advent book study group read together the nativity story of Luke these past four weeks. It's a detail that is easy to skim over, like the names in an impossibly long biblical genealogy, in order to get to the "real" story. The story we know. The story we've heard again and again, year after year, for decades.

But Luke is a skilled writer and he does not include this detail in order to add color to his narrative, adding descriptions that create a visual scene. No, Luke uses his words wisely in order to lay the foundation for the epic story he will tell of the life of this baby and the lives of those who would follow him, even after his death at too young an age.

Mary laid the baby in a manger. She didn't clutch him to herself as a comfort to him—or to her. Nor did she wrap him in blankets to hide him away from all the dangers of the world he was suddenly exposed to, now outside of her own body. Away from the protection of her womb.

She laid her baby in a manger.

And this was what the shepherds saw when they arrived from the fields, having been sent along by a heavenly choir of angels. This is what they witnessed in the stable. This is what they witnessed to when they set out to share the good news with everyone they knew.

Mary had laid the baby in a manger.

It was an act of bravery, of Mary's fidelity to the God who had helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

Mary knew her baby was the light and hope of the world, not just for a people some two millennia ago, but also for a people a 1,000 years ago. For a people 500 years ago. For a people now. And for our descendants forever.

And so, she laid the baby in a manger.

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.*

These past nearly two years have been clouded in darkness, haven't they? Somehow, even last Christmas felt brighter.

"Next year," we all said. But Covid Christmas was not a one-time event. The hopes of a festive season rekindled just months ago, as we entered into Advent and began our journey to the light that we knew, just knew was at the end of the tunnel. Dashed within the last week.

I don't know about you, but the "reason for the season" has never felt so punctuated with pain, with grief, with longing. Have we, as a congregation, as a country, as a people, ever longed so much for the light of the world quite like we do tonight, this Eve of the Nativity of our Lord?

Surely, we are a people who walk in darkness. But we are in good company.

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.*

That light is here. And I mean, here here. Tonight. In this place where we are gathered right now. Not just in the candles and the festive lights.

Those lights are signs of what is already present: Mary laid the baby manger and on that altar is a baby in a manger, the Eucharist, which we the creatures of God are fed are given new life.

A baby in a manger, the Bread of Life, which we, creatures of God, will share together, a moon shaped wafer that will shine within you and radiate from you, even as you leave this place and head back out into the darkness.

*Those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.*