



A JOY UNEXPECTED

Luke 2:10-12

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December 14, 2008

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Photos have power. A photograph can capture a moment in time and memorialize an event; making it unforgettable, even iconic. Just the right photograph can provoke emotion and even inspire action. A photograph can do more than just tell the story, some photographs have literally changed the world.

- This 1945 photo of marines erecting an American flag at Iwo Jima captured the moment of victory, but it also emboldened our troops and inspired the eventual victory over Japan.
- In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and said, “I have a dream.” The impact of that historic moment was captured in this photograph as our nation was challenged to rise above institutional racism and personal bigotry.
- In November 1963, 98 minutes after President Kennedy was pronounced dead, Lyndon Johnson took the oath of office on Air Force One next to Jacqueline Kennedy still wearing a bloodstained pink suit. This photo was taken to tell the world that democracy could not be assassinated.
- Public opinion of the Vietnam War soured even more in 1972 when this photo was published. Phan Kim Phuc, the clothes burned from her body, fled her village after it was napalmed by American planes.
- During the Soweto Uprising of 1976, government troops opened fire on blacks. This photo of the lifeless body of Hector Pieterse became the catalyst for worldwide condemnation of apartheid.
- A lone student defied Communist tanks and took his stand in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Although the revolt was suppressed, this event gave courage to Germans to take down the Berlin Wall only five months later.¹
- During the 1994 famine in Sudan, Kevin Carter took this picture of a vulture patiently waiting for a starving child to breathe its last. It was called “a photo which made the whole world cry.”
- And this photo of three firemen raising the American flag at the World Trade Center has become a symbol of resolve rising out of the rubble.

Photos have power. A single photograph can capture a moment in time, memorialize and empower an event to live on.

There are no photos of the first Christmas. No photos of the baby Jesus. No photos of what happened at the manger. And yet the power of that moment lives on. It lives on in the words of Luke 2. Luke 2 takes us back to the place where the shepherds heard the dramatic announcement of the Messiah and back to the moment when our Savior was introduced to the world.

Yet the struggle for us is that we’ve heard it all before. It’s so familiar, and we treat it like the rerun of an old movie. But we know better. It’s so much more than a religious holiday or a family reunion, a sentimental tradition. There’s more to it than another sweater, another CD, or another fruitcake. We must break through the familiarity of Christmas and come to a fresh fascination with the night Jesus was born.

How can we do that? By asking the question, *what difference does the manger make in our lives today, right now, this week?* Yes, it’s a sweet story, but sweet doesn’t help.

- What difference does the manger make when you’re commuting in traffic, doing homework, doing laundry, cooking dinner, washing dishes, carpooling the kids, paying the bills?

- What difference does the manger make to you as a teenager? With peers, with temptations, with choices, and when you're trying to decide what you're going to do with your life?
- What difference does the manger make when you work 60+ hours and sit in meetings all week? Or, when you've lost your job, the DOW drops 50%, or when you're about to lose your house?
- What difference does the manger make when your marriage is in trouble or when you hear the word cancer or when you attend the funeral of someone you love?

These are things I know all of us are dealing with. So, what difference does the manger make? Luke 2 gives us the answer. This is not some "once upon a time" fairy tale, but the account of God sending His Son into our world so that our lives would never be the same.

⁸That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. ⁹Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified (2:8-9, NLT). ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; ¹¹for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased" (2:10-14, NAS). ¹⁵When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." ¹⁶They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. (2:15-16, NLT)

"Behold, I bring you good news." We've heard enough bad news lately; bad news about foreclosures, layoffs, economic collapse; bad news about political scandal, terrorism, war. But Luke 2 is "good news." "Good news of a great joy ... for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."²

And it happened in the most an unexpected way. God as "a baby ... lying in a manger." But there's more. That baby gave His life for us. There are no more unexpected places for God to appear than a manger and a cross. God lying in a manger?! God hanging on a cross?!

God loved us so much that He came after us, He became one of us, He gave His life for us, so that He might save us.

HE CAME AFTER US

The Bible says, "For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost" (Luke 19:10, NLT). Human history is a divine search and rescue. From the moment things went wrong in the Garden of Eden, God has been passionately pursuing us. ***God loved us so much that He came after us.*** "This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger" (2:12).

Imagine the night Jesus was born. Just like any other birth, Mary strained, Joseph worried, and Jesus cried. It was so normal. That night shepherds watched their sheep, a scene that had been repeated unchanged for thousands of years, until that night. Something happened that night that had never happened before. The moment Mary gave birth, God entered our world.

The most humbling step ever taken was taken by Jesus. Jesus stepped down from heaven to earth, from majesty to a manger, from glory to humanity, from royalty to a cross. A “A baby ... wrapped in cloths ... lying in a manger.” The Bible says, “Though he was God, (Jesus) did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, (emptied Himself³) he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being” (Philippians 2:6-7, NLT). And it was all a part of God’s plan. Like a parent frantically searching for a lost child, from the moment things went wrong in the Garden of Eden, God has been passionately pursuing us.

“This will be a sign for you: (and) you will find ...” (2:12). Find what? In the manger, we find God. We find everything we’re looking for. God points the way. There is no secret map to find, no secret code to break. God pointed His finger at the manger and said, “Everything you need is right there.” Everything you’re looking for, everything you so desperately need is found in the manger. *Jesus is the solution to every problem and the answer to every prayer.* He is the solution to that economic problem, that health problem, that relationship problem, that marriage problem, that family problem, that emotional problem, that spiritual problem. God is pointing His finger at the manger and saying, “There’s the solution. There’s the answer.”

God loved us so much that He came after us. And the solution to every problem and the answer to every prayer is found in “a baby ... lying in a manger.”

HE BECAME ONE OF US

God loved us so much that He came after us and He became one of us.

Max Lucado describes the night the divine and the human met in Bethlehem.

(Mary) looks into the face of the baby. Her son. Her Lord. His Majesty. At this point in history, the human being who best understands who God is and what he is doing is a teenage girl in a smelly stable. She can’t take her eyes off him. Somehow Mary knows she is holding God...

He looks like anything but a king. His face is prunish and red. His cry, though strong and healthy, is still the helpless and piercing cry of a baby. And he is absolutely dependent upon Mary for his well-being.

Majesty in the midst of the mundane. Holiness in the filth of sheep manure and sweat. Divinity entering the world on the floor of a stable, through the womb of a teenager and in the presence of a carpenter.⁴

Mary did you know? Yes, she knew. Mary held God in her arms. The Creator of the universe fit into the calloused hand of a carpenter. All the creative power of the universe was contained in a 7 or so pound baby. God as “a baby ... lying in a manger.”

Swedish photographer Lennart Nilsson is famous for his microscopic photos taken inside the womb.⁵ This is a photo of an embryo 8 days after conception. Yes, God once looked like that! This is an inch long fetus at 6 weeks, with a tiny heart beating 150 beats per minute. Feet are fully formed at 16 weeks. Those could be the same feet that walked on water. The fetus is sucking its thumb at 20 weeks. Those could be the same hands that healed the sick and the same hands that were nailed to a cross. God became a fetus.

- “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:1, 14, NAS).
- “He is the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15, NAS).
- “In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9, NIV).
- “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Hebrews 1:3, NIV).
- “This is the great mystery of our faith: (that) Christ was revealed in a human body” (1 Timothy 3:16, NLT).

Does God in a manger mean God was reduced? No, never reduced. Yes infancy, but always Deity. Jesus was both human and divine.

- Human enough to nurse at His mother’s breast and divine enough to create the universe.⁶
- Human enough to be hungry⁷ and divine enough to be the “bread of life.”⁸
- Human enough to cry over those who died⁹ and divine enough to raise those who died.¹⁰
- Human enough to be tempted¹¹ and divine enough to withstand temptation.¹²
- Human enough to feel the pain of physical torture¹³ and divine enough to remain silent before His accusers.¹⁴
- Jesus was human enough to bleed and to die¹⁵ and yet divine enough to come back to life conquering sin and death.¹⁶

And because Jesus is both human and divine He makes God accessible to us. Jesus is Immanuel, “God with us.” We get to know God! Not just know about Him, like reading the biography of an historical figure. We get to know God personally, intimately, spiritually. We can talk to Him. We can pour out our hearts to Him and He will listen. He promises to walk with us, guide us, and lead us along our way. His phone is never busy. His calendar is never full. Jesus is everything we crave and everything we need.

Anne Graham Lotz writes so passionately about her love for Jesus.

Knowing Jesus is my joy and reason for living.

He is ...
 the Wind beneath my wings,
 the Treasure that I seek,
 the Foundation on which I build,
 the Song in my heart,
 the Object of my desire,
 the Breath of my life—
 He is my All in all!
 My Jesus is ... *Everything!*¹⁷

The “baby ... lying in a manger” is Immanuel, “God with us,” and we can know Him. He loved us so much that He became one of us so that we could have a personal relationship with Him.

HE GAVE HIS LIFE FOR US

And ultimately, ***God loved us so much that He gave His life for us.*** God lying in a manger *and* God hanging on a cross. The two most unexpected places for God to appear.

In human form, with all the capacity for feeling pain, Jesus “humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal’s death on a cross” (Philippians 2:6-8, NLT). Peter would never forget that moment and what it meant. “He personally carried our sins in his body on the cross ... By his wounds you are healed” (1 Peter 2:24, NLT). Paul would never forget the moment he understood the cross. “In Christ we are set free by the blood of his death, and so we have forgiveness of sins. How rich is God’s grace!” (Ephesians 1:7, NCV).

Do you understand what this means? *When we deserved it the least, God loved us the most.* Jesus gave His life for us. That’s how much He valued us. We are certainly not worthy of God’s grace, but in His eyes, we are not worthless. The Lord said of those He loved, “I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands” (Isaiah 49:16). And He meant that literally!

The other disciples had seen the resurrected Jesus with their own eyes, but Thomas was not there and he refused to believe it. “Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, ... I will not believe” (John 20:25). Then Jesus appeared to Thomas and offered His hand. “Put your finger here; see my hands” (John 20:27, NIV). How’s that for proof?! Jesus holds out His hands to the world and says, “Do you see how much I love you? This is how much you’re worth to Me.” God loved us so much that He gave His life for us.

When John was 90 years old, some 60 years after having walked with Jesus, he wrote this:

The one who existed from the beginning is the one we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is Jesus Christ, the Word of life. This one who is life from God was shown to us, and we have seen him. (1 John 1:1-2, NLT).

John saw Jesus. He witnessed every moment and every miracle. John saw Jesus face to face, he knew the color of His eyes. John heard Jesus speak, he knew the sound of His voice. And John touched Him. A hug, a slap on the back, a grip of His hand. And something else, the word “touched” is also translated “handled”¹⁸ and refers to handling an inanimate object. John is the one who prepared Jesus’ body for burial. John handled the lifeless, limp, bloodied, bruised body of Jesus. Mary held God in her arms, and so did John. Mary wrapped Jesus in cloths, and so did John. Do you think John ever forgot that moment? No way! John gave the rest of his life to Jesus. He never forgot that Jesus gave His life for him and neither can we. We just can’t forget.

SO THAT HE MIGHT SAVE US

God loved us so much that He came after us, He became one of us, He gave His life for us, so that He might save us.

“For today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior.” We needed a Savior who would sacrifice His life for us, a Savior who would forgive our sin, a Savior who would set us free.

- God sent His Son to free us from bondage to sin and guilt. We don’t have to be enslaved by those things anymore.
- God sent His Son to save us from a life of deception; from the lie that this life is all there is or that happiness can be found in what this world has to offer. We don’t have to believe those lies anymore.

- God sent His Son to spare us from the horror of hell; that place the Bible calls “eternal torment.” He wanted to rescue us from an eternity without Him. We don’t have to fear that anymore.

Grace means we are forgiven. “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:12). Grace turns back the clock as if we’d never done anything wrong. No matter what you’ve done, no matter how bad you think it was, God is ready and willing to forgive you. Jesus has already paid the price for your sin. All you have to do is confess it and accept God’s forgiveness.

Grace means we are His children. “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1, NIV). Never doubt your worth. Never doubt whether God accepts you. The moment you put your faith in Jesus you become a child of God and nothing can ever change that.

That’s the difference “a baby ... lying in a manger” makes! Jesus is the solution to every problem and the answer to every prayer. He is everything we need and He is enough.¹⁹

God loved us so much that He came after us, He became one of us, He gave His life for us, so that He might save us.

CONCLUSION

If you’re not a Christian as this point in your life, God longs for you to know Him. He longs for you to experience new life. And if you’re wondering what you have to do, I’ve got great news for you. You don’t have to become religious. You don’t have to buy a 10-pound Bible, because being religious can’t cure what’s wrong between you and God.

So what can? Faith in Jesus. How do you do that? ***Admit*** your sin. Admit that you have offended God by living life apart from Him. ***Believe*** that Jesus is God’s Son, that He died on the cross for your sin, and that He supernaturally rose from the dead. And ***commit*** your life to Him. The Bible promises, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9, NLT).

If you’re wondering what’s missing in your life, Jesus is what’s missing. What’s missing is a personal relationship with God. And you can have that the moment you place your faith in Jesus. What your soul craves most is found in “a baby ... lying in a manger.”

If you’ve been a Christian for a while, I urge you to affirm what you believe and celebrate it. Confess your apathy with the familiarity of Christmas. If you believe Jesus is God’s Son, then look into the manger and reaffirm your faith and recommit your life to Him and keep on following.

God loved us so much that He came after us, He became one of us, He gave His life for us, so that He might save us.

NOTES

1. The Tiananmen Square events took place on June 4, 1989, and the fall of the Berlin Wall took place on November 9, 1989.
2. See John 5:24. As the Savior, Jesus we move from death to life.
3. Philippians 2:5, NAS.
4. Max Lucado, *God Came Near* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1987), page 23.
5. See www.lennartnilsson.com. for background on these amazing photos.
6. Colossians 1:16.
7. Matthew 4:2.
8. John 6:48.
9. John 11:35.
10. John 11:17-44.
11. Matthew 4:1-11.
12. Hebrews 4:15.
13. Matthew 27:26.
14. 1 Peter 2:22-23.
15. Matthew 27:50.
16. 1 Corinthians 15:55.
17. Anne Graham Lotz, *My Jesus Is ... Everything* (Nashville, TN: J. Countryman, 2005), page 17. Anne Graham Lotz writes poetically about her love for Jesus (pages 12-13, 21).

He is enduringly strong.
He is entirely sincere.
He is eternally steadfast.
He is immortally gracious....
He is God's Son.
He is the sinner's Savior.
He is the captive's Ransom.
He is the Breath of life.
He is the centerpiece of civilization....
He is unparalleled and He is unprecedented.
He is undisputed and He is undefiled.
He is unsurpassed and He is unshakable....
My Jesus is ... *Everything!*

He forgives and He forgets.
He creates and He cleanses.
He restores and He rebuilds.
He heals and He helps.
He reconciles and He redeems.
He comforts and He carries.
He lifts and He loves.
He is the God of the second chance, the fat chance, the slim chance, the no chance.
My Jesus is ... *Everything!*

18. In the New American Standard Bible.
19. From the "I am" statements made by Jesus:
 - To those who are spiritually hungry, that baby is the "bread of life" (John 6:35)
 - To those who live in spiritual darkness and confusion, that baby is the "light of the world" (John 8:12).
 - To those who can't find their way to God, that baby is the "door" (John 10:9).
 - To those who desperately need direction and guidance, that baby is the "good shepherd" (John 10:11).
 - To those whose hearts are withering inside, that baby is the "true vine" (John 15:5).
 - To those who don't know which way to turn, that baby is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).