

STABLE-IZING YOUR CHRISTMAS!

Luke 2:1-7

BIG IDEA: LUKE'S STABLE HELPS US SEE CHRISTMAS THROUGH GOD'S EYES.

INTRODUCTION:

- A. Sometimes I wonder how much my view of Christmas has been skewed by the attitudes of the world. Our souls are like boat hulls in salt water. Barnacles attach below the water line with silent stealth. Then one day we notice we're moving slower than we used to and we have to haul the hull out and scrape the encrustations off. Christmas is a pretty good time to scrape a few of those barnacles off the hull of our souls.
- B. I'll try to help you do a little of that scraping today. I invite you to look at Christmas in hopefully some refreshing new ways. Actually I should probably say, "in some refreshing **old** ways." Let's read the story as if for the first time with the wonder of little children.
- C. *"I wish I had never read Huckleberry Finn," a man once told its author, Mark Twain. With a scowl the great humorist asked the reason for such a remark. "So that I could have the pleasure again of reading it for the first time," came the reply.*
- D. Something unprecedented happened in the stable at Bethlehem that night. So let's try to get back to that stable scene. Let's try to "stable-ize" our Christmas.

The story: **Luke 2:1**, *In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.* ² *(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)* ³ *And everyone went to his own town to register.* ⁴ *So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.* ⁵ *He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.* ⁶ *While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,* ⁷ *and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*

I. THE STABLE HELPS US SEE CHRISTMAS AS DIVINE **MOVEMENT**. That means...

- A. God Moved **First**
 1. Christmas is about movement. You see it in the songs we sing. Almost every Christmas carol in the book features movement. Listen for the word, "come," in this carols...
 - **Come**, *O Come Emmanuel*
 - *Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne and Thy kingly crown when Thou **camest** to earth for me...*
 - *Joy to the World, the Lord is **come**.*
 - **come**, *all Ye Faithful*
 - *Late in time behold him **come** (Hark, the Herald Angels Sing)*
 - **Come** *to Bethlehem and see Him whose birth the angels sing (Angels We Have Heard on High)*
 - *Angels from the realms of glory, wing your flight o'er all the earth.... **Come** and worship, come and worship, worship Christ the newborn king*
 - *Still through the cloven skies they **come** (of the angels in It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*
 - **come** *to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel (O Little Town of Bethlehem)*
 - **Come** *with me, ye children, O come one and all, to Bethlehem hasten, in manger so small, God's Son for a gift has been **sent** you this night... (Come With Me, Ye Children)*
 - **Come** *all ye shepherds... hasten to Bethlehem's stall (Come, All Ye Shepherds)*
 2. We see movement right here in our text...
 - Verse 4, *Joseph...**went** up...*

- Verse 5, He went there...
 - Verse 6, The time came...
3. **1 John 4:14** the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.
 - Galatians 4:4**, But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son...
 4. We learn the “You go first” principle from God. He always has been, is and always will be **the prime mover**. **David** experienced it in II Samuel 7. God moved and sent the prophet Nathan to make some wonderful promises about blessing on David and his dynasty. David was so overwhelmed at the thoughtfulness and generosity of God that he sat down before the Lord and said this incredulous prayer: *“Who am I, O Sovereign LORD, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far? 19 And as if this were not enough in your sight, O Sovereign LORD, you have also spoken about the future of the house of your servant. Is this your usual way of dealing with man, O Sovereign LORD?? (II Samuel 7:18ff)*
 5. Yes, I am happy to say, this is God’s usual way of dealing with man. God moves first.
 6. We preeminently see God’s “You move first” principle at Christmas. Think of that great Christmas verse...
 - **Galatians 4:4**, But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.
 - Nobody sent Jesus an invitation to come to Bethlehem. There were no reservations at the inn. Even the stable was a crisis-driven afterthought. This was all God’s idea and God’s initiative.
 - What an honor for God to think to visit us. When someone calls to say they want to come visit us, we are always honored. It’s a really nice thing when you realize that someone was thinking about you, someone picked up the phone. Someone got in the car and drove a few miles just to spend time with you!
 - *Television talk-show host Larry King made a very perceptive comment when he was asked who he would most like to have interviews from across history. One of those he named was Jesus Christ. “What would you have asked Him?” came the rejoinder to Mr. King. “I would like to ask Him if He was indeed virgin born, because the answer to that question would define history.” (Ravi Zacharias, Can Man Live Without God, Word Publishing, Dallas, 1994, xviii)*
 - Why would it define history? Because if Jesus is really born of a virgin, then it means we have been visited by God!
 7. God Moved First
 - *We must never allow anything to blind us to the true significance of what happened at Bethlehem so long ago. Nothing can alter the fact that we live on a visited planet. (J. B. Phillips, Good News)*
- B. God Moved Far
- Verse 7, *She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*
1. It’s wonderful that God makes the first move. But the story gets even more startling when we check out **where** it was He moved to! Our nostalgic hearth and home images come at great price. The Son of God paid the price. When He came into this world, he wasn’t coming home; he was leaving home. He left his home to make for us a home. Ravi says, *...Jesus’ earthly address changes ours...*(Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods*, Word, Nashville, 2000, 46). It was his love that moved him here. And how did his earthly address change ours? *In my Father’s house are many rooms... I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you,*

I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be with me where I am. (John 14:2-3)

2. Max Lucado imagines some questions for Mary. He wonders what it was like to mother the Son of God...

*Did you ever feel awkward teaching him how he created the world?
When he saw a lamb being led to the slaughter, did he act differently?
Did you ever see him with a distant look on his face as if he were
listening to someone you couldn't hear?
Did the thought ever occur to you that the God to whom you were
praying was asleep under your own roof?
Did you ever accidentally call him Father?
Did you ever think, "That's God eating my soup"?*

(Excerpts from Max Lucado, "Twenty-Five Questions for Mary," in Calvin Miller, *The Book of Jesus*, Simon and Schuster, 1996, 119)

3. For that matter, think of what it was like for God the Father to send His beloved Son down here! One Christmas song reaches for that with the chorus, *Out of the ivory palaces, into a world of woe. Only his great eternal love, made my savior go.*

4. Jesus explained to us that he had come *to seek and to save that which was lost*. He called His disciples to the same quest when he announced, *Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.*

You know—this is uniquely an earthly phenomenon. There is nobody lost in heaven. Everybody in heaven has already been found. Everybody in heaven knows precisely where they are.

5. By the way, the word, **stable**, never actually appears here. We infer the stable from the manger—literally, **a feeding trough.**

- **BOCK:** *The animal room that Joseph and Mary found may have been either a stable next to the place of lodging or a cave, since the use of caves for stables was common.... Ancient tradition associates Jesus' birth with a cave.... A basilica was erected over a cave site in Bethlehem in the time of Constantine (fourth century), at the site of the present Church of the Nativity.¹*

6. This feeding trough hints at the **GREAT SACRIFICE** of God's salvation plan.

- Sacrifice Cannot Be Delegated (**Hebrews 10:5, a body for me**)

1) We delegate all kinds of things we don't like to do, as long as the money holds out. We delegate oil changes and house cleaning; we delegate war and missions. But I can't delegate sacrifice.

2) The Old Testament delegated animals to die for sins. But animals couldn't really do it. **Hebrews 10:4**, *it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*

3) When it came to Christmas, Christ couldn't send someone else. Jesus measured John the Baptist as the greatest man who had ever been born, and John got his head chopped off, but he couldn't do Jesus' sacrifice for him. Jesus couldn't substitute the angel Gabriel. It had to be the body of Jesus. God prepared a body for Him! That's why we have the manger scene.

That's the whole point of the incarnation. Jesus, the little lamb, grew up to be the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world...the sacrificial lamb. John said he saw *a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain...*

(**Revelation 5:6**)

7. In the stable Jesus put His love for us sinners in flesh.

8. Jesus felt the saying goodbye. He went "there." He came into our "here."

II. THE STABLE HELPS US SEE CHRISTMAS AS DIVINE **DOWNSIZING**

¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke Volume 1: 1:1-9:50* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 208.

NOTE: A lot of us Boomer empty-nesters are downsizing. We do it to save work because we are getting a little creaky and that bog lawn is starting to cause pain. We do it to reduce housing costs because pretty soon we will be on fixed retirement incomes. We downsize because **we need** to downsize.

A. It's Not That Jesus Needed to Downsize

1. When Solomon dedicated the temple in Jerusalem he prayed like this: **1 Kings 8:27**, *"But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!*
2. From heaven to earth?
From heaven's royal hall to a stable?
From a throne to a manger?
From omnipresence to a womb?
That is some kind of downsizing! But don't be fooled! That little baby there in the stable? He is still just as much God as He ever was.
3. **Philippians 2:3**, *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. 4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: 6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, 7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross.*
4. **Martin Luther** wrote a poem that captures that blend of baby-littleness and God-bigness:
*Our little Lord, we give thee praise
That thou hast deigned to take our ways.
Born of a maid a man to be,
And all the angels sing to thee.*

*The eternal Father's Son he lay
Cradled in a crib of hay.
The everlasting God appears
In our frail flesh and blood and tears.*

*What the globe could not enwrap
Nestled lies in Mary's lap.
Just a baby, very wee,
Yet Lord of all the world is he.*
5. This stable scene is so full of mystery. Theologians describe with the term *theanthropic* [*theos* + *anthropos*] *union*. Church councils in the early centuries duked it out over how to describe it with theological accuracy. After a tussle with the heretic Arians, here's how the Council of Nicea said it in 325 A.D.
We believe...in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of the Father, that is, of the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made....
6. Nobody would have been worrying about how to say such things if the Son of God had not downsized. And if you think it is hard for theologians, think how it was for Mary!
7. Jesus may have looked small, but He wasn't really.
8. There's a wonderful little conversation in *The Last Battle*, one of the installments of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. *"It seems, then," said Tirian,... "that the Stable seen from within and the Stable seen from without are two different places."*
"Yes," said the Lord Digory. "Its inside is bigger than its outside."

“Yes,” said Queen Lucy. “In our world too, a Stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world.”

B. It's That We Needed Jesus to Downsize

Verse 7, *She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger...*

1. **Max Lucado** has a little Christmas piece called... *What's wrong with this picture?*

We used to look at such scenes in elementary school. To keep us occupied, the teacher would pass out drawings with the question at the bottom “What's wrong with this picture?” Remember them? We'd look closely for something that didn't fit. A farmyard scene with a piano near the water trough. A classroom with a pirate seated on the back row. An astronaut on the moon with a pay phone in the background. We'd ponder the picture and point to the piano or pirate or pay phone and say, “This doesn't fit.” Something is out of place. Something is absurd. Pianos don't belong in farmyards. Pirates don't sit in classrooms. Pay phones aren't found on the moon, and God doesn't chum with the common folk or snooze in fishing boats.

But according to the Bible he did. “For in Christ there is all of God in a human body” (Col. 2:9, TLB)...

Midwifed by a carpenter.

Bathed by a peasant girl.

The maker of the world with a bellybutton. (Lucado, Next Door Savior, 4-5)

2. But Jesus behaved with “smallness.” He behaved downsizing.

B. It's That We Needed Jesus to Downsize

1. **Hebrews 4:15**, *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-- yet was without sin.*

2. Jesus not only saves my soul, He supports my soul every day. He is there with divine, experiential sympathy where is lose someone I love, when I get sick, when I can't find a job...

3. He sympathizes with our weaknesses because He walked in your and my shoes. Words of Augustine from the 4th Century: *He it is by whom all things were made, and who was made one of all things; who is the revealer of the Father, the creator of the Mother; the Son of God by the Father without a mother, the Son of man by the Mother without a father; the Word who is God before all time, the Word made flesh at a fitting time, the maker of the sun, made under the sun; ordering all the ages from the bosom of the Father, hallowing a day of today from the womb of the Mother; remaining in the former, coming from the latter; author of the heaven and the earth, sprung under the heaven out of the earth; unutterably wise, in His wisdom a babe without utterance; filling the world, lying in a manger.*

4. The stable...it's about downsizing...

III. THE STABLE HELPS US SEE CHRISTMAS AS DIVINE CONFRONTATION

A. In One Sense, the Baby in the Stable Was Harmless

Verses 6-7, *...the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.*

1. What could be more harmless than a baby? And the child of a peasant woman, at that! When Jesus initiated His public ministry, this is the OT text he read at synagogue: **Luke 4:18**, *“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”*

2. Why would anyone be afraid of Jesus?

3. Back in the late eighties, Empress Zita, the last Hapsburg Empress, died. Vienna was the scene of her funeral procession. *Thousands fell in line behind*

the catafalque, drawn by six black horses. The procession came to a stop at the Capuchin Church, and there, a long-observed tradition was enacted. As a member of the funeral party knocked on the closed door of the church, a voice from within asked, "Who goes there?"

The titles were read aloud: "Queen of Bohemia, Dalmatia, Croatia, Slavonia, Galacia. Queen of Jeruslaem, Grand Duchess of Tuscany and Krakow."

"I do not know here," came the response from within the church.

A second knock, and the question of "Who goes there?" brought forth the response, "Zita, Empress of Austria and Queen of Hungary."

Again the reply, "I do not know her."

*When the inevitable question was put the third time, the answer was simply, "Zita, a sinning mortal." "Come in," came the welcoming voice, as the doors were slowly opened. (Ravi Zacharias, *A Shattered Visage*, Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1990, 167)*

4. *Come in...* That is the invitation of Jesus. That seems pretty harmless.
 - **Matthew 11:28-30**, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."
5. But just like Empress Zita, I have to drop all the trappings of earthly prestige and power, and humble myself before God as a sinner needed forgiveness.
6. Kings don't like to kneel.
7. I don't like to kneel.
8. In this sense, Jesus is confrontational. In this sense, Jesus is very dangerous to me. He is a threat to my pride and pretense.

B. In Another Sense, This Is One Very Dangerous Baby!

Verses 1-2, *In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria*

1. **This is more than just a date stamp on the Christmas card photo...**
2. **Octavian** was his name, the adopted heir of his great uncle, Julius Caesar. After the murder of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C., Octavian formed an uneasy alliance with Marc Antony and general, Marcus Lepidus—called the Second Triumvirate. These three spent several years defeating enemies. Then Marc Antony got involved in a political intrigue with Cleopatra and in the war that followed, Octavian won, became the absolute power leader of Rome, and was given the title, Augustus (27 BC), by the Roman senate. Augustus meaning "divine" or "majestic." The Augustan Age is also known as the *Pax Romana* -- the peace of Rome...² [Reigned 27 BC to AD 14] Our month of August is named after him.
3. **Darrell Bock:** *Luke portrays Augustus as the unknowing agent of God, whose decree leads to the fulfillment of the promised rise of a special ruler from Bethlehem.*³
 - **Micah 5:2** "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."
 - *The accidental events of history have become acts of destiny. Little actions have great significance, for the ruler was to come out of Bethlehem and only a governmental decree puts the parents in the right place.*⁴
 - The significance of Bethlehem was not lost on Jerusalem's political and religious leaders: **Matthew 2:3-6**, *When King Herod heard this he was*

² <http://www.answers.com/topic/caesar-augustus>. Accessed 12/20/09.

³ Bock, 203.

⁴ Bock, 203.

disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."

- Bypassing Samaria, this was a journey of **90 miles** from Nazareth to Bethlehem.
4. From God's viewpoint – and Satan's – Christmas signals far more than the birth of a baby; it was an invasion, the decisive advance in the great struggle for the cosmos. (Philip Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 192.)
 5. Baby Jesus was a threat to King Herod the Great, a local ruler well down the food chain of Roman governing officials [**MATTHEW 2**], but He was an even greater threat to the Devil. God peels back the curtain and lets us see just what desperate issues were at stake in that rude little stable.
 - *The God whom Satan remembered from heaven resided in a level of glory unimagined on earth. Satan was unsure of a lot of things, but one thing he knew -- God in heaven would not allow his Son to be born in a barn. Doubtless he had told his demons to check the finest homes for the most illustrious surroundings and outstanding parents. But the Lord fooled him.* (How God fooled Satan at Christmas, by Joe McKeever)
 - Satan is a brilliant antagonist, and he has the best spy network in the world, but it wasn't until the Wiseman showed up in Jerusalem that Satan had a clue something threatening was going on. Thus the slaughter of the infants in Bethlehem. But Jesus slipped his grasp in the nighttime flight to Egypt, and the Devil was fooled once again. *Satan had lost Jesus.* (McKeever)
 6. Baby Jesus is a threat to me! **Brennan Manning** imagines that God does it something like this. He imagines these words in the mouth of God: *I will not leave you alone. You are mine. I know each of my sheep by name. You belong to me. If you think I am finished with you, if you think I am a small god that you can keep at a safe distance, I will pounce upon you like a roaring lion, tear you to pieces, rip you to shreds, and break every bone in your body. Then I will mend you, cradle you in my arms, and kiss you tenderly.* (Brennan Manning, *Lion and Lamb*)
 7. God says that to kings, and he says it to me, and he says it to every one of you...

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CONCLUSION:

- A. God has a way of provoking movement. Revelation scenes:
 - 1:17, *I fell at his feet*
 - 4:10, *the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him*
 - 5:8, *the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb.*
- B. People move in the Christmas story...
 - The shepherds: **Luke 2:15**, *When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." 16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.*
 - The wise men: **Matthew 2:1**, *Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2 and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."*

- C. Maybe you need to move this Christmas—move toward Jesus Christ. In Brontes’ novel, *Jane Eyre*, the schoolmaster calls young Jane ... *a very wicked girl and then asks her if she knows where wicked girls go when they die. “To hell, sir,” answers Jane Eyre. The schoolmaster reminds her that hell is a place of fire where wicked girls will burn forever. Jane agrees that she is wicked and will likely go to hell when she dies.*
“What do you plan to do about it?” asks the schoolmaster.
“**I plan to live a very long time, sir,**” the child answers.
*In the novel you are instantly on Jane’s side and find yourself wondering what happens to wicked schoolmasters when they die. But one thing is sure: like Jane Eyre, most of us plan to live a long time. (Calvin Miller, *Jesus Loves me*, Warner Books, NY, 2002, 221-222)*
- D. Maybe you, like me, plan to live a very long time. But we have no guarantee of that. We may not make it home today. So perhaps today is a day of destiny for you—a day to accept God’s rich gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. Why not, today, say *Yes* to Him?!

Timothy G. Walton
Alderwood Community Church
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