

Perhaps the most well-known Christian symbol of Christmas is the manger scene. There are manger scenes in people's front yards. Churches have manger scenes. Some people even put together live nativity scenes. What thoughts do you have, as you look at a manger scene? That is what we will be talking about this evening.

The first thing you notice about the manger scene is that everyone – Mary, Joseph, the shepherds – everyone is looking in the same direction. They're all looking at the manger, at the baby lying in the manger. What do you think Joseph is thinking as he looks down at the infant? He's probably recalling what the angel had told him earlier in a dream, that this child was not conceived from any man, but from the Holy Spirit. God is physically the father of the baby, not Joseph. Joseph is probably thinking about his responsibility of taking care of this holy child. Joseph is probably remembering that the angel had told him that this child should be named Jesus, because he would save his people from their sins. As Joseph looks into that manger, I'm sure he had some questions: "How in the world am I supposed to be the stepfather to the Son of God? And how is this baby going to take away sins? How is this all going to work?"

What do you think Mary is thinking as she looked down at her son? She's probably remembering what the angel Gabriel had said to her, that this baby would be called the Son of the Most High. God would someday give this child the throne of David. He was going to be a king, and he would reign forever and ever. I'm sure Mary is thinking about what her cousin, Elizabeth, had said to her, that she, Mary, was blessed to be the mother of the Lord. As Mary looks down at the manger, she probably has questions too: "How am I supposed to raise the Son of the Most High God? How would that work? And when will he become a king? Early in life? Later in life? How will he reign forever, since no one lives forever? How is this all going to work?"

And then there are the shepherds who had just arrived from tending their flocks in the fields nearby. What is on their minds as they look at the infant lying in a manger? They probably were thinking of what the angel had said to them, that this little infant is the Christ, the one that God had been talking about for thousands of years in the Old Testament. This little child is the Lord, Jehovah. He is the one who brings peace on earth. And there he is, lying in a manger, just as the angel said he would be. But as those shepherds look at that child, I wonder if they had questions too, questions like, "How can this little baby be the Christ? Wasn't the Christ supposed to be greater than this? Shouldn't the Lord Jehovah be born in a palace and not a stable? Why is it this way? How would he bring peace to this earth? What will he do? When will this happen?"

I'm sure many thoughts and many questions were flowing through the minds of these people standing around the manger that first Christmas Eve. There is one person missing from the manger scene we haven't talked about yet. It's not the wise men. Although they appear in many manger scenes, the Bible tells us that they didn't arrive until much later, when Joseph and Mary and Jesus had moved into a house in Bethlehem. The person missing from the manger scene is you. You see, through the Word of God, through the eyes of faith, you are transported to the manger scene two thousand years ago. What would it be like, if you could literally go back and time and stand with Mary and Joseph and those shepherds in that stable in Bethlehem?

Where would you stand, first of all? How close to the manger will you dare to stand? When you look around, you are shocked to see how ordinary everything looks. Look at how poor

and humble Mary and Joseph look! And the shepherds – they’re much rougher around the edges than you had imagined. And the barn – you cannot help but notice the smell of the animals. And that manger – it’s nothing more than an old feeding trough. This place is not as clean and the people aren’t as neat as the manger scenes you’re used to seeing.

And so there you stand, and you draw closer to the manger, and you dare to look right into the baby’s face, right into the eyes of the Son of the Most High. There he is, the Great Jehovah, the Savior of the World, looking at you, with that same look that all babies seem to have. What would you think? What would be in your heart?

You wouldn’t have the same questions that Mary and Joseph and the shepherds might have had, because you are Christian who knows the whole story. Unlike them, you know that this child will grow up in the home of Mary and Joseph, and that he will help his father, the carpenter. You know about his life, how he will preach to the crowds, but hardly anyone would believe him. You know that he will someday perform hundreds and hundreds of miracles, but hardly anyone will follow him. You know that someday, his closest friends will desert him, and that he will eventually be hung on a cross to die. But you also know that someday, this infant child will rise from the dead, and ascend into heaven, and rule forever as King.

What would you think, if you were at the manger scene with Mary and Joseph, and the shepherds, looking at the holy child? You know the whole story, and perhaps that is what would fill you with awe. Here, in this feeding trough, is the one and only reason that you are forgiven by God. Here, lying in a barn with animals, is the one and only reason that you have peace with God. Here is the Christ, who promises you that he is preparing a mansion in heaven for you. Here, he is only an infant, and yet, he is the one you pray to, the one you worship on Sundays. This little child is your God, your Savior.

What would you do, if you could go back in time and stand in the stable? Maybe you would want to talk to the shepherds, or to Mary and Joseph, and tell them the whole story – “Here’s what’s going to happen – here’s how he’s going to save us from our sins, here’s how he will be a king forever!” But the night is silent, and you see how quiet and how respectful the shepherds are. You see how relieved how peaceful Mary and Joseph look, now that they know that Mary and the baby are OK. And so you stand quietly. You and look down into the manger one last time, and you ponder all these things in your heart.

And although it is quiet, there is a sense of hope in the air. Even though they don’t understand everything, you can tell that these people have hope. Joseph is full of hope that this child will save the world from sin. Mary is full of hope, that her son will be the Christ whose kingdom will last forever. The shepherds are full of hope, that through this child, God will bring peace. Yes, this is a quiet place. A humble place. But a place of hope – you can feel it in the air.

Here in the manger is visible proof that God does keep his promises, that God does love you and the world. God is so faithful, so loving, that he becomes an infant on Christmas Eve, lying in a manger, looking up at you, just as real as the babies you see today.

Truly, it is a silent night, but a holy night. In the midst of this dark, chaotic world, there in the stable, all is calm, and all is bright, around the virgin mother and child. Here you see God as a holy infant, tender and mild, sleeping in heavenly peace. Here we have hope, a reason to rejoice, a place of peace.

May the manger scene be for you more than just a nice seasonal decoration. May it be for you a reminder that the Son of God has been born. Here God begins the work of saving your soul. We pray: O holy Child of Bethlehem, Descend to us we pray! Cast out our sin and enter in; Be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels and great glad tidings tell; Oh, come to us, Abide with us, Our Lord Immanuel! Amen...