

A Baby in a Barn?!?

Luke 2:1-14

First Baptist Church of Anderson, SC
Christmas Day, 2011
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One of the neat things about having children is getting to tell embarrassing stories about them...from when they were little. My parents had plenty they told on me—granted it wasn't from the pulpit, but they told them just the same!

This one—the one I'm about to tell--really shouldn't be embarrassing though, and it's much too good not to tell. It comes from a time when our family was living in Roanoke, Virginia—so Katie can breathe a sigh of relief. She's off the hook!

Katie was born in South Carolina. This happened while we were still in Virginia. It was getting close to Christmas at the time.

Claire, our oldest child, was almost four; and she and I were in the car driving around looking at all the Christmas lights. Little brother David wasn't old enough to fully appreciate the lights, and Mom was getting him to bed. So it was just Claire and me in the car.

It made for one of those good teachable, daddy-daughter moments. As we were "ooing and aahing" at all the lights, I asked her, "Claire, do you know why we celebrate Christmas?"

She nodded "Yes" and said, "Because Jesus was born in Bethlehem."
"That's right," I said.

Then she asked me a question: "Daddy, was Jesus born in a hospital like David and me?"

You need to know that every time we went by Lewis-Gale Hospital, we would point to it and say to Claire, "That's where you were born." So, she had good reason to think that maybe Jesus was born in a hospital too.

I chuckled to myself at the question...and said, "No, honey, Jesus was born in a stable." "Oh," she said, "That's where Mary and Joseph were."

"That's right!" I said, pleased that Claire knew this part of the story. Then came another question, "Daddy, what's a stable?"

Funny isn't it? We assume everybody knows what a stable is, but she had no reason to know that yet; so I said, "A stable is sort of like a barn."

"A barn," she exclaimed, "that's where animals live!" "That's right," I said, "and that's where Jesus was born—in a barn."

Then Claire said something I'd heard many times before, and usually she was right. When I told her Jesus was born in a barn where animals were kept, she grinned real big and said, "Nooo, daddy, you're teasing me."

And she really thought I was. It seemed just a bit too unbelievable...that Jesus was born in a barn; and even at the tender age of three, she was not about to swallow that.

And, you know what? Through her innocence, I found myself overwhelmed once again with wonder that the only begotten Son of God should be born in a stable surrounded by all the sights, sounds, and smells provided by the regular inhabitants of such a place.

When I was a kid, it was my job to clean out the stable—the horse barn--so I know what I'm talking about. This really is an incredible story! Let's listen now as St. Luke tells us the Christmas story through the voices of our children (Luke 2:1-14):

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.

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But

the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

Carol: Away in a Manger (No. 103)
(Children return to their seats as we sing)

Away in a manger,
no crib for His bed,
The little Lord Jesus
lay down his sweet head.
The stars in the sky
looked down where He lay
The little Lord Jesus,
asleep on the hay.

The cattle are lowing,
the poor Baby wakes,
But little Lord Jesus,
no crying He makes;
I love Thee, Lord Jesus,
look down from the sky
And stay by my cradle
till morning is nigh.

Be near me, Lord Jesus,
I ask Thee to stay,
Close by me forever,
and love me, I pray!
Bless all the dear children
in Thy tender care
And take us to heaven,
to Live with Thee there.

Baby in a Barn?!? (continues)

So we've talked about it, read about it, and sung about it: a baby in a barn--Jesus, the Messiah, born...in a barn. Incredible!

Now, the prophet Micah said it would happen at Bethlehem, but surely even he would have thought a stable to be a very odd delivery room.

But that's where it happened: in a most insignificant place—a stable—in a most insignificant little town—Bethlehem.

In the last line of his popular carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," Phillips Brooks shares this reflection on the place of Jesus' birth: "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight."

How true! Our hopes and fears "meet" there in Bethlehem as they meet again and again each Christmas season. Think for a few moments about the images of 'hopes and fears meeting'—not just meeting, but colliding really—in the Christmas story.

1. First, there was that crowd gathered in Bethlehem. It was census time for the empire. They had traveled to Bethlehem to be counted.

Now, there was some hope involved in that process. Somebody was noticing them—they counted for something. Maybe it meant their lot in life would improve—I'm sure there was someone there from the government insisting that it would.

But there were also fears. Understandably so—a foreign power was occupying their country. It was Caesar Augustus who had decreed that they all be counted.

They must have wondered, "Are we being counted so they can better control us, or draft us, or tax us?"

The powerful emperor wasn't known for his concern for the little people of Bethlehem and its surrounding territories. What reason was there then to expect anything good to come from this census? There were lots of fears among the crowd—for good reason.

2. Then there were Mary and Joseph—they were part of that Bethlehem crowd; as history would have it, they became the most famous of all the folk who gathered in the village that day.

Mary and Joseph were decent people. They had deep and significant family roots. They were people of faith. Their character was solid.

Yet, they must have wondered while there in Bethlehem, given the circumstances of Mary's pregnancy—they wondered whether their integrity would be called into question. Would their good name--their reputation--be tarnished?

"Will folks understand? Will they know that what's happened to us is of God? How could they know--so what will they think?"

We try to be good people, too—so...we can relate to their concerns. We can understand how this might've been quite a struggle for these two young people.

3. Or go deeper into the story--how about the Wise Men? Those travelers from the East who came bearing gifts for a new king—symbols of their hope and devotion.

Oh, they are certain that their calculations have brought them to the right place; and yet maybe they are not so sure after all. They begin to doubt and question. Maybe they've made a mistake and lost their way.

They decide to stop by Herod's court and seek out other Wise Men, their professional peers, in order to question them. They're afraid their journey might be exposed as foolish; perhaps they'll be embarrassed by their colleagues. They struggle with their fears, even while so near to completing their journey of hope.

4. And how about old Herod—let's not leave him out. He's a big part of the story. Herod also has hopes and fears.

Herod hoped to maintain the security of his present position. It was a tough job being king, but somebody had to do it; and Herod was determined it would be him!

But here come these Wise Men asking, "Where is he who is born to be King of the Jews?" He tried not to let on, but this worried Herod. He became so fearful, in fact, he sic-ed his soldiers and their swords on all the boy babies in and around Bethlehem. It's ugly what fear and insecurity can do to people, isn't it?

5. Finally, let's go back to the shepherds. They were out in their fields, "keeping watch over their flock by night." Their hopes were pretty basic.

They hoped their flock would stay well enough to eke out a living for themselves and their families. They hoped that something might come along to improve their lot in life. But they feared that nothing would change; and if it did, it would only be for the worse.

So that night in Bethlehem, when the Angel of the Lord appeared...and the light shone 'round about them, they were afraid—"sore afraid" it says in the King James Version—which means they were "terrified!"

Yet the Angel said, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people."

For everyone in and around Bethlehem, the crowd, Mary and Joseph, the Wise Men, Herod, and the Shepherds--for all of them--hopes and fears existed side by side...struggling for dominance in their hearts.

This same tug-of-war continues today, friends, in every city, suburb, and countryside--in every heart, soul, and mind.

Hopes and fears collide because we all want to count for something, but we fear we won't.

We all hope to be people of integrity and honor, but we fear our sins and shortcomings will do us in.

We all search for a place of ultimate worth, a task to which we can dedicate our lives, a cause that is totally untarnished.

But, like old Herod, we worry about our status and security—what people will think, and whether we'll continue to fit in--and this gets in the way of our being our best selves.

The confrontation continues between our hopes and fears, yet today—Christmas Day--we take time out to celebrate.

We celebrate because a baby was born in Bethlehem; and we understand that He was God's sign to us that we don't ever have to face our struggles alone.

Jesus Christ's birth in Bethlehem's barn brought good news into our world—good news of great joy to each of us who allows God's Son to be born...not just into our world, but into our hearts.

When Christ is born in us, we understand: we do count—for God has sent His one and only Son to be our Savior and Lord.

We can be people of honor and integrity before God, for in Christ we are forgiven and cleansed of all sin.

We can be about something meaningful and worthwhile, because Christ's invitation to us to come and follow Him...is the highest and most fulfilling calling of all.

So fear not, Christian. With Christ as your Savior and Lord, you're never alone as you fight life's battles.

Fear not, for in Him you are assured the ultimate victory—the eternal victory.

Fear not, for Christ brings to your life and mine peace—a peace that surpasses all understanding.

Fear not, for the Christ of Christmas brings us 'good news of great joy—and it's for every one of us!'

Thanks be to God for this BABY, God's Messiah, our Lord and Savior, BORN IN A BARN. And by the grace of God, BORN also IN OUR HEARTS!

