

Luke 2:1-20

It's pretty apparent to us that the shepherds were men. They didn't ask for directions. Now it's true that Bethlehem was not a large town, but it was filled with people at the time. And it was dark. Directions may have helped. A street name perhaps, and yes, they had them in those days. But rather than give directions the angel said, "This shall be the sign for you, ye shall find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger." At least they knew to look in a barn. Mangers were used for feeding animals. The shepherds would find the Christ in a barn, a stable.

Why do you suppose the angel was not more specific? He could have said, "In the southern part of town," or "Take a left at the synagogue and go down to the end of the street." But no directions...none, just the sign, "the Christ is wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger." And the sign was not given so that they would have an easier time finding Jesus. It was a sign telling them who this baby was and why He had come. The words of the angel were not like a road sign, but a sign from heaven. And therefore, the sign is just as much for us today as it was for the shepherds.

The sign is two-fold. The Christ is "wrapped in swaddling clothes," and He is "lying in a manger." What does this sign mean for us? Swaddling clothes were diapers. Not what you would find on a king's baby, these were strips of cloth that even the very poor used to wrap their babies with. And these swaddling clothes are a sign—a sign to the shepherds, a sign to us, a sign to the world—a sign that God "became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich."—a sign that the Christ came to our world, "not to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many."

These swaddling clothes are a sign that God is not ashamed to wear our human flesh. He is not ashamed to have His diapers changed by His young mother. For our sakes, that we might know the richness of His grace, God is content with swaddling clothes wrapping His bare bottom.

Who is God? This sign tells us. Our God comes, not to sit in the seat of honor, but to live in poverty. He comes, not to take from us, but to give to us what is His—His glorious Kingdom, His sinlessness. He comes to join us in this world of sin and restore to us what our parents lost in the Garden—the image of God...holy, pure, innocent. These swaddling clothes tell us that we have a gracious God; a God who is merciful to sinners and that is good news for us, for we sinners desperately need a Savior. Christmas means that you, dear sinner, were formed in the womb of your mother by a God who came to take your sin away; a God who declares you forgiven. For your God was willing to enter the womb of a young virgin that He might take your place in hell. These swaddling clothes are a sign that point us to Good Friday. For when your Savior died He again was wrapped in strips of cloth and then laid into a tomb—so that you, through His poverty...His suffering and death, might be given the hope of heaven's glory.

The sign is two-fold. This Christ in swaddling clothes is "lying in a manger." The shepherds were going to find the Christ in a feeding trough. No crib for a bed, the manger is where the shepherds were to look for Christ. And the sign is for us as well. Where do we find Christ? In the manger—the feeding trough—the place where food was distributed and given to the animals. And that place is here in God's House. This may look like a

church, but we could call it a barn—the place where God’s sheep find food and shelter. The food is the Bread of Life, Christ Jesus Himself. Here in His Word and Sacraments Christ is distributed and given to you and for you. At the baptismal font, at the altar, through the preached Word Christ gives Himself for the life of the world. Here is Christ’s manger where Jesus gives Himself to you that you may know you are forgiven of your sin.

And so, how sadly ironic that a number of churches canceled Christmas services today. “Christmas is for family time,” is their reason. But we will not find Christ given for us in the gathering together of families. Christmas is not a warm feeling inside. Christmas is not the opening of gifts with pretty bows on the outside. Christmas is not getting together with family and friends. The angel did not tell the shepherds to throw a party, cook a turkey, and exchange presents. He said to find Jesus in the manger. We may also do those things on Christmas, but that’s not what Christmas is about. It’s about coming to His manger and receiving Him which is Christ the Lord, believing the words, “given and shed for you for the remission of sins.” And Christ is not here in His manger for you just twice a year—on Christmas and Easter. He is here for you every single week. Because we are sinners the whole year through He comes to forgive us the whole year through.

And that is good news for us. For you and I cannot ascend to God, and so He comes down to us. He comes as the Bread of Life to the font, through His Holy Word, in the bread and wine. On this Christmas Day God has led you to the same place He led the shepherds 2,000 years ago—to find Him who was wrapped in swaddling clothes; Him who came to save you from your sins; Him who is the peace of God. He has led you, as He does week after week, to the manger. And here Christ is always for you—so that on this Christmas Day you, like the shepherds, may rejoice believing that God has truly saved you from sin, death, and hell through the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.