

Micah 5:2, 4-5
Luke 2:1-7

Pastor Dennis Plourde
A Manger Bed

December 24, 2007

Our eldest son logged thousands of highway miles as an infant not wearing a seat belt or being in a child seat! Now I don't think we could have found one (child's seat) if we wanted to. We would put his crib mattress in the back seat and he would lie down and sleep, or play as we drove. By the time our second was born there were some car seats but they were more for the convenience of the parents rather than for safety! They certainly would not pass any crash tests today!

Mary and Joseph would probably be arrested today. Who could imagine or condone the use of a manger for a bed. The feeding trough of animals, it might have been wooden or it could have been hewn from a rock (discovered pictures of mangers from ancient stables, hewn out of rock! What if the manger was a rock hewn one?). When God comes the first bed of the Creator of all the universe is an animal feeding trough, a manger. There are no fine linen sheets, cozy warm room, surrounded by the finest one can provide, but a manger in a stable in Bethlehem.

Bethlehem is the place of hope and promise. The prophet Micah speaks of its place in Israel's history and of the promise it contains. Hundreds of years before this night in Bethlehem it played a unique and important role in Israel's history. Saul has disappointed God and Samuel is called to choose another one to be King over Israel. It is to a man in Bethlehem that he is sent. It is from the lineage of Jesse that the next King of Israel will come. Here among Jesse's sons Samuel is to anoint the next king. Here a son of Jesse, the grandson of Obed and the great-grandson of Boaz and Ruth is to be found. Jesse and his sons are invited to a banquet with Samuel and it is from one of the sons of Jesse a king is to be found. However, Jesse leaves one son out in the fields. The shepherd, David, is not even thought to be important enough to bring in from the flocks. After all the other sons have more potential, more stamina than David. And David is the youngest, and the youngest is never chosen for such important tasks. The sons pass by Samuel but the one chosen is not there. No one can image that God's choice would be in the shepherd son, David.

Joseph is of the house of David, Jesse and Obed. It is because of this ancestry that Joseph must return to Bethlehem from Nazareth. There is no other possibility, the prophets have spoken of it, it is out of Bethlehem that the hope of Israel is to come. Nazareth is a nice place but it is not Bethlehem. Here in the city of David, a city rich in history—a history of choosing the least important the expected will happen again. God comes.

Clean straw, strips of torn cloth, a new blanket and a manger welcome God. New life, new hope springs again from the home of David, the town of Bethlehem. A child is born. Another miracle of life.

My beeper went off and when I called the hospital switchboard the operator connected me with the head nurse of the neo-natal unit. A child had just been born. She weighed just over 20 ounces and was not expected to live more than a few hours. The family was Catholic and needed the baby baptized. Could I come or find a priest who would. We hadn't had much luck finding a Catholic priest who would come on a Friday night unless it was one of his parishioners. The family had no connections with any local congregation. None one would come.

Now this was not a time to have a theological discussion about the meaning of baptism with the family. Catholic law allowed and accepted an ordained minister/chaplain

from outside the Catholic faith baptizing a child under such conditions. The head nurse, the mom, grandmother and I stood in a circle. I had some water and knew the proper words. I held out my hand and the nurse laid the baby in it and held her hands under it. I took the water and gently touched the baby's forehead and baptized her, Jessica, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. After a brief prayer the nurse took Jessica and I stayed with the mom and grandmother.

Nine months later I stood again with the same head nurse, mother and grandmother and held Jessica again, one last time before she left for home. She was not supposed to see this day. It was by all accounts a miracle. I often think of Jessica. She did not have a whole lot going for her. She had a single mom for a parent who was pregnant again as she took Jessica home.

I tell this story because although I have no idea what happened to Jessica I have no doubts about what happened to this child of Bethlehem. To Mary and Joseph and to all of humankind a child was born this night in the city of David, he was placed in a manger as the weight of world rested on his shoulders. A few shepherds heard angels sing, some star gazers saw a new star and began a journey that would take months before they could fall at his feet and offer him their gifts.

It is because of this night that another night comes into play. A night when this child of Bethlehem, following a centuries old tradition, takes bread and breaks it and says this bread represents his body, broken for us; we are to eat it in remembrance of him. It is this child of Bethlehem who then takes the cup and says that this cup represents his blood, which will be shed for our sins; we are to drink it in remembrance of him.

The angels simply sang of a child lying in a manger bed:

“For unto you this night, in the city of David, a Savior is born who is Christ the Lord and you shall find him wrapped in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.”