

Advent – Season of Light

1. The precinct:

- **Bethlehem**

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

2. The place:

- **Barn**

- *James 2:5*

3. The person:

- **Baby**

- *1 John 4:9; Ephesians 3:17-19; Romans 5:6-7;
John 3:16-17*

4. The present:

- **Being**

- *Colossians 1:27-28*

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Illuminate: Advent

Well, that was interesting! That is a good example of how bad we can mess things up when we try to write our own salvation story. But of course, that's *not* the Christmas story; the real one was written by God for us. Allow me to take a few moments to remind us what the Christmas story is really about: it is the gift of God's love given to us in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. In the story of Jesus' birth we find many things that point to God's love (unlike anything that was just read to us!). First, we see God's love in...

1. The *precinct*

...where Jesus was born. You would think that if this baby was the king of the Jews, he would be born in the capital city of the Jews—Jerusalem. But that wasn't the case. In fact, he was born in a little tiny town:

Bethlehem.

This wasn't even a one-light town. But Bethlehem stood tall for all the little towns because the King of Kings was born there. This is what the story says:

"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

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. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them." (Luke 2:1-7, niv)

It was God's intention all along for His Son, the King of Kings, to be born in the small town of Bethlehem. Seven hundred years earlier God promised this when he said through the prophet Micah:

"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." (Micah 5:2 niv)

Bethlehem was about 5 miles south of Jerusalem. It was so small it wasn't even a suburb of Jerusalem—it was more of a curb of a suburb. And here's the great news: Bethlehem shows that God identified Himself with all of us common people by being born in an ordinarily small-town place.

Make note also that Bethlehem means, “House of Bread” or “the home of bread.” What’s interesting about that is that Jesus is called the Bread of Life (John 6:35)! So this little bread-town is forever known as the birthplace of the Bread of Life. Not bad for a one-camel town.

God still works this way today. In many unassuming ways, often through unassuming people, God is at work to carry out His plans in this world. So please don’t think you are too small or insignificant for God to love you, to work in you, and to work through you.

Next, we see God’s love in...

2. The *Place*

...where Jesus was born. Bethlehem was such a small town that it couldn’t handle the influx of people that had come by order of the census; therefore every inn and every guest bed was full. So instead of being born in a birthing center or at a nice hospital, or even a spare room in someone’s home, Jesus was born in...

a *barn*.

Jesus was born homeless. The Jews thought their coming king, their anticipated Messiah, was one who would return Israel to the days of glory, pageantry and wealth. So naturally they thought he’d be born in a palace. To them, the very idea that the King, their Savior, would enter this world in the stench of a cattle barn and spend his early hours sleeping in a feeding trough was scandalous. In their mind it was an insult to all that Yahweh was. But God doesn’t work by human expectations. He works by His own terms, and the manger was, and is, an important part of His great plan to redeem mankind. You see, the manger set the tone for all that Jesus would be in this world. Yes, He would come as a King, but not one set *above* His people—He was set *among* his people. He would live in society as we live. He would face the same struggles, the same troubles, the same temptations, the same desires and the same circumstances as average, ordinary people do. If he had been born in a palace, the poor would feel left out. But He came for all of us, from the lowest to the greatest. He was born in the stench of animal dung, laid in the saliva-streaked fodder box of ox and cattle.

His life would begin in an ordinary way, and would remain so until the day He took His last breath. He would get down into the muck and mire of human existence and labor alongside his people. He would keep company with tax collectors, prostitutes, common laborers, displaced immigrants, and segregated ethnicities because He did not consider Himself too good for them. The manger set the tone for this, and we should be thankful because those whom Jesus was born among and kept company with – *they are us*. That’s why the Bible tells us in James 2:5,

"God has chosen the poor of the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom."
(James 2:5)

Now, we have been told for centuries that the manger was simply a feed-trough; a piece of wood or stone designed to contain an animal’s food. There is no doubt that the first bed the baby Jesus rested in was just that, but the entomology of the original word for "manger"

suggests far more than just something designed to hold cattle fodder.

In Hebrew, the mother tongue of Old Testament Scripture, the root-word for “manger” means “to feed.” So when the story was told in the first century, they would not only recognize the humble physical significance of the manger but the *spiritual* significance as well; He is the bread of life—God has fed us and is feeding us through the life of His one and only Son.

Next, we see the Love of God in...

3. The *person*.

All of God’s limitless power and love was compressed into the form of one little infant boy...

a *baby*.

When that first cry was heard from the stable of Bethlehem, when into the care of Mary and Joseph came a wrinkled, vernix and blood covered baby, the entire universe reached a turning point from which it would never be the same again. For the first time, the God and Creator of all universes, who before had only been heard and spoken of by humans, who could only be beheld in burning bushes and pillars of cloud and fire, *that* God could now be seen and touched by humans. But that also meant this God could be spat upon by humans, laughed at by humans, and tortured and killed by humans. The Creator took on the skin of his own creation. All that He was as God now occupied human flesh as man...approachable, available, *vulnerable*. In all our religion, *we* can never become God, but in Christ, God could become *us*.

On that night in the stable Mary and Joseph were filled with love for this little infant, as any new parents would be. But they could hardly imagine how much this little baby boy loved *them*! His love for them would reveal itself most dramatically when He was a grown man and was cruelly nailed to a cross for *their* sin. The infant lying in the manger would, three decades later, make God’s love crystal clear to them and to all of us!

John, one of Jesus’ followers and close friends would later write this:

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:9)

The baby born in the barn in Bethlehem gives us an amazing truth: God initiated the relationship with us!

That is the exact opposite of what religion teaches. *Religion* tells me that I must improve myself until I have earned the love of God. I must chant enough times, do enough good deeds, obey enough rules, go through enough lifetimes, and perform enough rituals ... on and on. But in Christianity *God came to us*. He knew we could never do enough to get to him, so he came to us. We know that God loves us right now just as we are, and not the way we think we should be. You cannot persuade God to love you more because His love is absolute. Nothing you can do will make him love you more than he already does, and no sin you commit will make him love you less. Although God hates sin, His love for us sinners is

so absolute that He sent his one and only Son to die for us while we were yet sinners. The Bible tells us that God is love (1 John 4:16). This means that love is the very essence of God. It's not just that God feels love or does loving things (although He certainly does). It is that *the very nature of God is love*. Love does not exist apart from God. If you could vaporize God and cause Him to cease to exist, then all love would disappear with Him; love would cease to exist.

The apostle Paul prayed that his readers would begin to get their arms around God's love:

I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” (Ephesians 3:17-19, niv)

It cost God the Father dearly to dispatch Jesus to earth. John has told us that Jesus died as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. That means that Jesus satisfied the requirements of the Law that *we* deserve to be punished for our sins. When God's Son was nailed to the cross, our sins were legally transferred to Jesus so that He became culpable for everything you and I have ever done wrong. At that terrible moment God the Father and God the Son were severed from one another for the only moment in all of eternity.

And God committed this sacrificial act of love despite the fact that we didn't deserve it, nor did we even want it! The Bible says:

“You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:6-7, niv)

Christ died for us long before we ever did anything to deserve it! Actually, we will *never* be able to deserve it! Christ died for us solely because He loves us.

He did more than die for us. The Bible says that God sent His Son so that we might *live* forever! God sent his one and only Son into the world that *we* might *live through him*. Jesus rose from the dead and offers not only to forgive our sins; He also offers us abundant and eternal life. Jesus Himself said:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” (John 3:16-17, niv)

We can live *real* life here and forever into heaven if we believe in Jesus. To believe in Jesus means to believe that He is God; that He died in your place, and to put your faith in Him rather than in yourself or in any religion. Here's one way to understand this: up until the moment you believe in Jesus, you are the god of your own life. Believing in Jesus means that you resign as “god” of your life and ask Jesus to take the throne of your life – to become your God.

In an amazing act of Love, God sent his one and only Son to a little nowhere *precinct* called Bethlehem to be born in the *place* of a filthy barn in the *person* of a baby. He did that to

fully identify with the very least of us, to be one of us. He gave up His throne in heaven. He took on flesh—not just for a brief 33 years but for all of eternity. He will always have flesh from then on. Because He loves you.

Prayer

Finally, see...

4. The ***present***.

The amazing thing about this gift of love is that it really isn't worth anything until it is given away. Love turned inward is narcissistic egoism. Love by its very definition is only fully love *when it is shared*. You have been loved by God. If you have accepted Christ, you have accepted love. You have been transformed by love. Your life is now defined by love. Love is the present that God gives to the world, and he gives it to the world through *Christ in you*: in...

a ***being***.

You are to take Christ in you, and be the gift of love to the world around you, to your next-door neighbors. Are you loving your neighbors? Reach out. Build friendships. Love them where they are. Help them if you can. Serve them as you are able. The Message Bible says it this way:

“This mystery has been kept in the dark for a long time, but now it’s out in the open. God wanted everyone, not just Jews, to know this rich and glorious secret inside and out, regardless of their background, regardless of their religious standing. The mystery in a nutshell is just this: Christ is in you, so therefore you can look forward to sharing in God’s glory. It’s that simple. That is the substance of our Message. We preach *Christ...*” (Colossians 1:27-28, tmt)

Or, as your Bible might say:

“*It is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*” (Colossians 1:27)

Christ in *you*. You, in your very being, is the present of love that God desires to give to the world. At Christmas and all the year around, you and I get to love others – *we* are the gift of God’s love to those around us.

Prayer:

- *The Precinct: so my ordinary, insignificant life might experience you*
- *The Place: in the midst of my sin, you came into my life*
- *The Person: Jesus came for me...for that one here who thinks they aren't good enough...for each of us*
- *The Present: I pray that I may share and give the gift of love to my neighbors...to others...to the least.*

Benediction:

(May) Christ dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.
(Ephesians 3:17-19)