



December 10, 2006

The Four Words

It's just like clockwork, it happens every year and you have to wonder, "what's the big problem here?" What am I talking about? the manger scene. Every year someone will put one up and they get sued by the ACLU or the American Atheists Association or some other group to take it down. In Downey California where I was born down in Southern California the city put a manger scene on the front lawn of city hall. Of course, they got sued and they had to take it down. However, a local church offered to buy a portion of the front lawn and at fair market value I might add which was approved and the church put the manger scene up on the part they owned the next year. The city was sued, separation of church and state how can a church own part of city hall's front lawn? So, a citizen purchased it put up the scene and another lawsuit was filed; improper zoning of course. Last I heard the manger scene was in storage. We have a manger scene in front of our house. There's a blow up version of the manger scene across the scene from us here at Zion on Ham lane.

We see them on mantles; we see them on dining room tables how can anyone object to Mary and the baby Jesus with Joseph the shepherds and the angels hovering over them? To understand why I think we must first look at ourselves and realize we've been anesthetized. We've seen all those cute, homey, tranquil, pretty, soft manger scenes and we really don't think about it. But when we do we should quickly realize this isn't a normal scene. In fact, God doesn't want us to view it as cute, homey, tranquil, pretty or quaint instead we should be disturbed, confused maybe a little upset. You see the manger scene isn't there to put us in a "holiday mood" rather it is there to shake us up. Which just happens to be why the folks who oppose it want it gone. You see, they have thought about it and they're greatly disturbed its implications.

Four words in the Christmas story should really challenge us. Those four words are found in Luke 2:12, "Lying in a manger". Really think about that. The God of the ages too glorious to look upon is

lying in a feeding trough. Now let me make that point very clear. In Exodus 33:18 Moses asked to see God's glory. God's response in Exodus 33:20 is, "nobody can see me and live", but God does put Moses in the cleft of a rock and covers him passes by and then allows Moses to see His back or the trail of His glory. The great deliverer Moses couldn't see God he had to be hidden from God and when in the presence of the burning bush he had to fall down flat on his face. Or Isaiah known as the greatest of the writing prophets cries out, "woe is me I'm ruined" when given a vision of God on His throne, not even seeing God himself just a vision he goes into a great depression. Even the angels the seraphim that surround God's throne cover their faces and their feet with their wings when they're before the glorious one. Yet God, too glorious for even the greatest of men and angels to look upon is lying in a manger. Why?

There are several reasons. Let's do the easy one first; the practical reason. This is the sign to the shepherds "you will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger". Bethlehem was full of people was the census there were probably several babies in town at the time. Homes were all filled with visiting relatives the inns were full but the stables well that makes it a quick and easy search. There's only going to be one baby in a stable lying in the feeding trough. But why, why the shepherds why the need for the shepherds, why did they have to find Him this way? Well, I think part of it was for Mary and Joseph. You see Mary and Joseph's plight was very difficult. They weren't married, Mary's pregnant this doesn't look good. In fact, by human standards obviously fornication has occurred, adultery has occurred Mary should have been stoned. Life was tough for her during those nine months, so bad that she had to leave home and go and be with her relative Elizabeth. Sure, she and Joseph both had a vision telling them what was happening but you know after nine months of ridicule, hiding, running and undeserved shame they now find themselves in the stable with their first child lying in a manger.

I can imagine that they may have begun to question what's going on because this doesn't seem right. I can see Mary saying "isn't this the Messiah the promised one shouldn't he be in a palace, shouldn't there be angels here, shouldn't there be trumpets to announce his birth?" and Joseph is probably doing the same thing and wondering, "maybe that dream I had was just a dream maybe Mary is lying to me". They were probably so confused so perplexed

and then here come the shepherds and they confirm yes he is the messiah. How can they know that? God gave them a sign he told them the babe would be lying in a manger. How sweet and how comforting that message must have been in Mary and Joseph's ears. But those words also tell us of character. This is maybe where the ACLU and the Atheists Association of America, maybe this is where it starts to get a little disturbing for them. But it should also be a little disturbing for us.

First it tells us about mankind's character there was no room for Him in the inns in Bethlehem. Very symbolic as for there was no room in the inn or in the hearts of the people. It's a character flaw that continues to this day in humanity. There really doesn't seem to be enough room in the hearts of people for Jesus. But it also tells us about the character of God. Many critics of God love to paint a picture of a wrathful, vengeful, judgmental unfair God from the Old Testament however, if this were true would such a God disgrace Himself, contain Himself in the body of a baby and allow himself to be placed in a manger? No, this shows mercy, this shows love, and this shows humility. The creator returned to a decidedly hostile world not with His Divine wrath prepared to destroy all that would treat Him with contempt but He came in divine mercy prepared to endure all that we could throw at Him lying Him in a manger. Could God say, "I love you" any clearer?

Finally lying in a manger is the key to fulfilling what Paul praised for the people in Philippi in our New Testament reading today. He begins that prayer in Philippians 1:9 where he says that, "their love will abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight". What does he mean knowledge and depth of insight? Well, let me try to explain. I'll begin with a question, "how many of you have been invited to spend the night at the Whitehouse?" I don't think that has happened. What would your reaction be if the President or your favorite president of all time came to our town, came to our church or better yet came to your home? It just doesn't happen does it? The presidents a busy guy he's the big wig, he's the leader of the greatest country in the world he meets with other leaders he meets with prime ministers he meets with all the big important people. But our God creator of the universe came to us lying in a manger. Let's be honest that's lower than all of us which tells us He came for everyone. From the lowliest to the most important and He invites us not to the

Whitehouse but He invites us to come to spend an eternity in His true home, heaven.

When we understand lying in a manger then our knowledge and our depth of insight grows. Our love will abound because when we see lying in a manger then we will know what true love is and what true love is meant to be. My prayer for this Christmas season is very simple that we will all see Him lying in a manger.

In our Savior's name, Amen