

Christmas Eve

CRADLED THROUGH THE CROSS

Luke 2:1-14 [15-20]

Christmas Eve

Analysis by Lori A. Cornell

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3All went to their own towns to be registered. 4Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

8In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

*14"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

15When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

DIAGNOSIS: Cradle without a Cross

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Cleaning up the Stable Scene*

If you've ever mucked out a calf stall you know that the scene Luke paints for us of Bethlehem is anything but romantic. In fact, it stinks. Yet we human beings are forever whitewashing Jesus' birth: the circumstances by which his parents come to Bethlehem (taxes!), the sordid family setting into which Jesus is born (to a couple engaged, but not married), the actual context of his birth—a stable (as one hymn indicates, a place of "mean estate"). We want this first Christmas to have been sweet, even pristine. We want Luke's gospel words to warm our hearts, not disturb us.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Cleaning up Messy Living*

Maybe it's not just Jesus' first days of life we want to prettify. Perhaps we only wish for baby Jesus what we'd like for ourselves: pristine lives. Lives without spot or blemish. Maybe that's why we are such a "do-it-yourself" culture; seeking forever to improve at least our real estate value, if not

improve the value of our messy lives. At least, when we improve our property, we can say we are worth something fiscally, even if we don't believe we are worth anything inside. Or maybe the clean-up job we see we truly need is an "inside job"—mucking out the calf stalls of our hearts, as it were. It is a job worthy of our attention, but we are hardly fit to accomplish it—since we can neither stand the smell in there, nor do we have the tools to do such scouring. And the fact that we set ourselves to the task at all is evidence that our efforts are misguided. There is only One who can clean up our messy lives. He has been asleep in the hay; and, despite Christmas hymns to the contrary, he has cried with the lot of us (both at Bethlehem and Golgotha). But we're not looking for this Someone to muck out our calf stalls; that would mean we'd have to admit they need cleaning.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Out Damned Spot*

How like God's people of old we are. Remember what Isaiah says? "The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand" (1:3). The very Lord of heaven and earth is laid in a manger, bound in swaddling clothes; and all we do is coo! We should be gasping for breath; and our hearts should be cracked open. Instead, we shine the fluorescent lights of Xmas on Jesus, and try to "catch the spirit," replete with tinsel. And God's gracious power passes us by.

PROGNOSIS: Cradled through the Cross

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Blessed and Claimed at the Cross and Stable*

But what if the sweet child in the manger, turned out to be the Man of the Cross? What if that sweet babe is the Owner and Master, who rules from the most unexpected places? What if the babe we keep trying to prettify, catches our attention—not because of his rosy infant cheeks and sweet disposition, but

because he cried out forgiveness from the Cross? In fact, that is Who this baby is: Jesus, God Incarnate. God's Word has taken flesh, not simply to warm our hearts once each year in December, but to shake us to our foundation and raise us up in the "wonders of his love." This baby is Christ the King, who is pierced by nails and spears for us.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Claiming Messy Lives*

Jesus endures such messiness in order to give the calf stalls of our hearts a thorough redo. In fact, even when we hear this Christmas text (with all the messiness of taxes, unwed pregnancy, and emergency birth in a stable), and hear it in light of the mercy of his Cross, Christ means to motivate us out of the way, so that he can get to work on our messy existence. And, having heard the cry of Christ from the Cross, we expect to find the Owner and Master of our hearts right there in the messy stables of life; we pay attention to this Christmas sermon of Luke's anew because the One who owns our hearts has been loosed on the world. And with Mary we treasure and ponder this Promise anew.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Claiming Life, Cradle and All*

Which means that the "spirit of the season" is not over come December 26. Instead, the Spirit is at work, every time we hear a word about this Christ of the Cradle and Cross, calling us to make way for the Owner and Master of heaven and earth. And, believing that Christ is at work, especially in the messy places of life, we claim that life—for ourselves and our neighbors—cradle and all.