

“The Bread of Life”

My daddy’s older sister was born in the bedroom of my grandparents’ house on a farm outside of Gaffney in 1934. She weighed 2.5 pounds. There was no “neonatal” unit, no incubator, no helicopter to airlift her to Charlotte or whatever was the nearest big city of that day. So she was placed in the drawer of the nightstand beside my grandmother and completely covered in sterile cotton, except for her mouth and nose, because a drawer was what was small, secure and available. She was fed with an eye dropper because her stomach was too small to hold any more nourishment than that at one time and Grandmama told me that they had to feed her every 30 minutes so she wouldn’t starve.

In all the years that I have heard this story, I have never heard whether my grandparents were hopeful or afraid. I have never heard that they argued with the doctor about a better way to care for this baby who was born too early under difficult circumstances. They just did what they had to do and placed the baby in a drawer. Today, my aunt Jean is 82 years old, a mother of four and grandmother of eight.

The birth of my Aunt Jean is somewhat similar to the birth of Jesus, the Messiah. He came at an inconvenient time when his parents had nowhere to place him but “in a manger” as Luke says. Actually, the word manger means “feedbox for animals”. It may have been made of wood and filled with straw, as our nativity scenes depict. More likely, it was a rectangular stone that was hollowed out for hay and water. When we saw a real manger in Israel and our tour guide asked if we knew what it was, no one in the group got the right answer. But when I hear Natalie Grant’s Christmas song “Believe” I always see that manger in my mind’s eye. She sings.

“Woman with child and an inn with no room. Born in a manger, foretelling a tomb”. And that is what a real manger looks like, a child-sized concrete coffin.

So what can we learn or feel or grasp in our hearts from these words that we have heard, some of us hundreds of times, as we come to the Table this Christmas Eve? What does Christmas Eve mean to us all? For many of us, Christmas Eve means home. But for Mary and Joseph, unaware of course that they would be establishing the first Christmas Eve, it meant GOING AWAY rather than coming home. Yet, when their child, their son, was placed in the feed box, even though they were NOT surrounded by family or friends or familiar things, the stable became HOME simply because they were together and God was there.

Tomorrow, some of us may be going to a place that is home to someone else. Some of us will stay in our own homes and wait for people to come to us or share home with those who are already here. Some of you have come in as guests or returned to your childhood home for this Holy weekend.

We also have church members who are spending Christmas Eve alone or in the hospital. And there are some even in this room who are facing the first Christmas without a special loved one because you have been separated by death, distance or disagreement. This can bring a real feeling of sadness that is mingled with the joy of Christmas. Because of these and other circumstances, you simply may not be in the HOME that you are used to celebrating Christmas in or with the people that you usually are surrounded by. What a comfort to us all to remember that the very first Christmas Eve was not home because of the *place* or even because of the *people* who were there, but simply because of the *presence of God*.

So it is for us today. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” the apostle John tells us. And this reminds us that, wherever we gather, certain of the presence of God among us, that

that is where our HOME is. Christmas for children of the living savior is simply knowing that Christ dwells among us, no matter where we are. Friends, “Christmas is not merely an anniversary celebration of Jesus’ birth but the active remembering of what God has already accomplished in Jesus Christ and the promise of the coming completion of God’s reign.” (1) It is not just the birth of Jesus but the birth of a new creation that is just for us.

Of course, as Luke reminds us, the baby was born in a stable or more likely a cave, because there was no room in the inn. Now, since it is emphasized throughout the gospels that Mary and Joseph were simple people with very modest means, I doubt very seriously that they had reservations at the Bethlehem Hilton. They were, after all only traveling to the city of David because that is where Joseph’s family was from and they were being required to register for the government. Perhaps Joseph had relatives in town but so many family members were there for the census that a cave out back was the only place where they could rest. But the facts, the real circumstances of the story, are not really important.

You see, I believe that when Luke tells us that there was no room in the inn, it was just symbolic of what was to happen to Jesus later in his life. Throughout his ministry, Jesus would discover that there was often no room for him. No room among his own family who did not understand why he left Dad’s carpentry business to wander around the country with a bunch of fisherman. No room among the Pharisees – the religious leaders of the day – who did not like his radical teachings of inclusiveness and forgiveness. No room in the hearts of men and women who feared him or even among his disciples when they did not understand his words.

In fact, the only place where there WAS room for Jesus was on the cross. Did Mary know when she kissed her child’s forehead that it would one day hold a crown of thorns? Did she sense that the little hand that grasped her fingers as she nursed him would one day be pierced

with nails? Even though the angel of God had made bold declarations to Mary about what her son, conceived in mystery, would bring to the world, we can only assume that she did not fully understand how this would manifest itself in Jesus' life. If Mary had known what grief was ahead for her and her son, would she have been able to experience the joy of swaddling him to keep him warm? I imagine it would have simply been too much to bear.

And maybe you think I shouldn't bring up such sorrow at a time like Christmas Eve, but friends, it is THIS picture, THIS reality that brings us to the table today. Jesus Christ, the only child of God, was placed in a manger. His first bed was a box that held the food for animals. But it was the very shadow of the cross that the manger rested under that makes the Baby Jesus the "bread of life" for you and me tonight. And because Jesus became the bread of life for everyone here, the promise of Isaiah is fulfilled. Tonight, we celebrate that the wilderness will be glad, the desert will rejoice, the lame will leap and the mute will sing for joy all because God gave his child to be the bread of life for the world.

And so this evening we celebrate the mystery of salvation and the love we cannot truly grasp by coming to the Table to remember how Christ feeds us one and all. The bread and the cup are a picture of love that took on human form, lived among us, suffered for us, died and was raised for us that we might know true life, in this world and the next.

The hope, peace, joy and love that were called to mind as we lit the Advent candles each Sunday are fulfilled tonight as the living bread is set before us. The promise of the child in the manger is that, anyone who drinks from the cup of salvation will receive living water and will never be thirsty again. God's broken heart over the condition of God's people became whole when Jesus left the halls of Heaven and landed cold, wet and squirming on a pile of hay. Then

that child became broken on our behalf so that *we* could once again become whole and healed as God intended us to be. The babe in the manger became the light of the world.

And it is my prayer that as we give thanks for the nourishment of the bread and the cleansing of the cup, we will remember that Jesus still joins us at the table today, by the power of the Holy Spirit. And we will remember that our lives are fed by Him so that we can go from this place and feed the lives of his body in the world as we share the Good News with each other. May his presence be for us a mystery to which we can respond only with thanks and praise for the grace we have been given. And as God fed the world with the quiet birth of His unlikely Messiah, may we believe and share the joy that is Christmas. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(1) Kimberly Bracken Long, Feasting on the Word, Year b, Volume 1, pp.93-97.