

Christmas Eve
December 24, 2025

The news these days is often troubling to hear, difficult to bear, and heavy on our hearts.

This night, however, as we come together, we are told there is good news of great joy, beyond what we would have thought possible: it is this same troubled world that God loves; to those who are weary comes the One who burden is light.

We hear again that God has come to us, unexpectedly crying as a newborn child. And this is such a wondrously good story that we might think it should begin: “Once upon a time”—an opening phrase that tells us not to take any of what follows too seriously.

Luke’s Gospel begins in a different way, however. This familiar story of the birth of Jesus tells us that it occurred in the days of Caesar Augustus. “Augustus” meant “one who is worthy of great honor”—approved by the gods and human beings. He was recognized as a “savior” who ended many wars and brought peace. He ruled with unquestioned and unrivaled power.

The Christmas story is grounded in a specific time and, because of this, it invites us to listen to it carefully and with curiosity. We are invited to receive it as, well, as a *gift*, even if we’re not quite sure what kind of gift this is or how it might be used.

Like you, I’ve heard this story countless time. What piqued my curiosity this year was how central to this story is that manger where a baby was laid. Three times in just ten verses, we hear of this humble resting place.

Mary gives birth to her firstborn son, wraps him in bands of cloth, and lays him in a manger.

The angel of the Lord stands before astonished shepherds, announcing the good news of this birth and telling the shepherds that in Bethlehem they would find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. This will be a *sign* to them. And I’ll come back to that.

The shepherds go with haste. They find Mary and Joseph and, we are told, the child *lying in the manger*.

For Luke, this baby in a manger is more important than the mighty Augustus. That must have seemed ridiculous to many who first heard this story. But Luke is unapologetic. This baby in a manger is crucial to the life of the world.

This baby in a manger—not Augustus—is a Savior.

Savior.

That’s not a word we use a lot. It suggests that we can’t take care of ourselves, that we can’t use our own ingenuity, or thoughtfulness, or scientific skills, or creativity to solve the problems that beset us. It suggests that we’re not strong enough or tough enough or stoic enough to bear up under all that assault us.

On theologian asks: “What does it mean to be saved?” and answering his own question says that “In considering the matter some people focus on life after death, but it seems to me salvation is closer to daily life itself. Salvation means being saved *from* greed, hatred, and confusion; and being saved *for* kindness and creativity, wisdom and compassion. If someone asks us if we are

saved, we should say: ‘Sometimes.’ In our more loving moments we are saved from hatred, even if only for fifteen seconds...”ⁱ

Frederick Buechner gives us some concrete ways of re-imagining this word when he says: “If you’re pulled out of water over your head, if someone drags you from a burning building, if you discover that life—your life—has a deeper meaning and greater value than you could ever create yourself, chances are you’ve found a savior.”

The angel tells the shepherds that the child who is born this day is a savior. And in case there is any doubt, the shepherds are given a sign. This, we would think, is where we will get some amazing proof of what the angel has said. Perhaps a multitude of heavenly hosts will now appear.

Instead, the angels say this baby, born to ordinary people, wrapped, as all infants were, in bands of cloth, lying in a manger is the sign. That is, this child, this manger points to something greater. One person suggests: “It almost sounds like a joke.”ⁱⁱ But look! The baby Jesus in a feeding trough points to God’s saving love—a love that pulls us out of the deep waters and burning buildings and pointless lives we all too often find ourselves caught in.

Of course, shepherds should have been the last people to be entrusted with any message of any importance. At the time when Jesus was born, most people thought shepherds were dishonest and usually suspected them of grazing their flocks on other people’s land. Shepherds weren’t to be trusted.

And yet, the very messenger of God tells these people of all people about this birth and this child.

Luke then tells us that the shepherds arrive and find this infant “lying in a manger.” There in the place you’d least expect it, the people that you’d least expect to find it discovered the sign they’d been told about. It was enough to send them out rejoicing and praising God.

It is the birth of a Savior—not Augustus, the powerful, but this child, the vulnerable: a savior in a manger; a savior attended by ox and donkey, not the family and friends who might have been there to aid with a birth in Nazareth.

This child comes into this world as all children, not in control. This child comes, as all children, dependent on the love and care and goodwill of others. That is to say, he comes as one of us, knowing the weakness that we know.

By faith, we say that this child, vulnerable and powerless is the very *incarnation of God*. As astonishing as it seems, God takes on human flesh, bridging the great chasm between the human and the divine. The powerful becomes powerless, taking on our human vulnerability. This is good news because it means that the One we call Emmanuel, God with us, understands what it is to be human; and understanding, empowers, encourages, and calls us into the future.

Look tonight and, along with the rest of this weary world, you will see in this infant Jesus a very human child, vulnerable as we all are. Perhaps this year we can see more clearly, more fully, that in this Jesus, God has taken on our human vulnerability, knowing life as we know it in all its uncertainty—and all its joy.

For behold! This child in a manger comes as a sign of the hope and happiness that come into our lives through the presence of a child: God’s affirmation of the sheer joy of human life, God’s

encouragement of our earnest hope for a better future.

This child is the one whose birth announces that at the center of all existence is a love that will not fail, a goodness that will stand.

The manger is a sign: the God of love comes to us in Jesus Christ, shares our life and suffering, knows our fears and sorrows. This is the love of a God who desires our good, who will be our strength.

ⁱ Jay McDaniel <http://www.jesusjazzbuddhism.org/the-religion-of-daily-life.html>

ⁱⁱ Frederick Danker, *Jesus and the New Age*, pg. 58.