

Away in a Manger

Luke 2:6-7, 12, 16

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Number four in our favorite Christmas song countdown is *Away in a Manger*. It's a children's song, a lullaby. Maybe we like it so much because it's peaceful and comforting or it reminds us of our childhood or makes us think about our children or grandchildren. There's something about children and Christmas that touches us and moves us. Years ago, an older man told me he didn't care about getting Christmas presents. "Christmas is for children," he said. And, while there's something to that idea, it kind of made me sad. I wish I had said then and I say now, "Christmas is for everyone, for all of us." There may be aspects of how we celebrate Christmas that are mainly for children, but Jesus came for us all, the good news of great joy is for all people.

So we sing this children's lullaby as part of our celebration. Where'd the song come from? What does it say? What does it mean for us?

The first two verses of *Away in a Manger* first appeared in a German Lutheran children's songbook in Pennsylvania sometime in the 1880s. No one knows who wrote the lyrics. Some later songbooks attributed it to Martin Luther, but it's pretty certain he didn't write it. The third verse was added some time later and it's also anonymous.

The song quickly became popular and was reprinted in several songbooks, including one called *Dainty Songs for Little Lads and Lasses*. What a title! Its popularity is also seen in the number of tunes for the poem. One author listed forty-one different musical settings for it. One of the more popular tunes was composed by American Gospel song writer W. J. Kirkpatrick. The one we're most familiar with was probably composed by James R. Murray. This is the tune for the song in our current hymnal as well as in two previous Methodist hymnals from 1932 and 1964.

One online history of the song mentions a Moravian tradition of *trombone choirs* performing the carol. As an old trombone player, I'm kind of tickled by that.

(See http://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/away_in_a_manger.htm; that site includes a link to the essay *Not So Far Away in a Manger* by Richard S. Hill; also see <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-away-in-a-manger>)

Let's look more closely at the song and the Scriptures it refers to. If we've heard the story of Jesus' birth, we know he was placed in a manger. A manger is a feed trough for animals. Mangers are usually in barns or stables.

One of my earliest memories has to do with a feed trough. Until I was three or four years old, my family lived on a farm. One day, I was with Dad at a neighbor's farm. We were in the hayloft of the barn. I think Dad was getting some hay. I have a vague impression of him tossing bales into the pickup. What's not vague is my memory of falling through a hole in the floor of the loft. I don't know why I did it, but I did. And I fell down into a feed box or trough several feet below. I wasn't hurt, but Dad sure moved fast coming down the ladder to check on me.

I've tried to think if there's a connection or illustration here of Jesus coming down and winding up in a feed trough, a manger. But, that seems like too much of a stretch, so we'll just let my story stand as a memory of a manger.

We remember and honor Jesus' birth by depicting the setting. Sometimes we call those portrayals "Nativity scenes." The word nativity refers to birth, so these depict the scene of Jesus' birth. They usually show him in the manger, though sometimes they show Mary holding him. *Crèche* is another word for models that portray the scene of Jesus' birth. And, some folks just call them "manger scenes."

We usually imagine the manger scene with animals present, since the birth happened in a stable. Over the years, some have made a connection with Isaiah 1:3, "The ox knows its master, the donkey its owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." So usually an ox

and a donkey appear in a manger scene that celebrates the One who helps us know and understand our Lord and his ways.

St. Francis of Assisi, in 1223, was the first to create a Nativity Scene in Greccio in central Italy. It was a “living nativity,” with live animals and people playing various roles. The townspeople gathered on Christmas Eve. There was singing and Francis preached. He was overcome with emotion as he spoke of the infant Jesus. It was like the Italian village became Bethlehem for a little while. People were moved by that portrayal of Jesus’ birth. Within a couple of centuries, nativity scenes were popular all over Europe (James Howell, *Why this Jubilee?* 31-32; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nativity_scene).

As Luke’s Gospel relates the story of Jesus’ birth, the manger is mentioned three times. The first simply recounts the birth of Mary’s child. This is the promised child that the angel had told her about. Mary and Joseph are in Bethlehem, because of a census that was being taken by order of the emperor in Rome. Everyone had to go to their hometown to register. Joseph was a descendant of King David, who was from Bethlehem, so that’s where he and Mary went. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born. Mary gave birth to her firstborn, the son that had been promised. She wrapped him in cloths—some sort of swaddling. This was customary for keeping limbs straight.

Our daughter and son-in-law have learned how to swaddle a baby. They say it helps Charlie not flail around and wake himself up. (You knew we couldn’t get through talking about the birth of Jesus without some grandson stories!)

Mary placed Jesus in a manger. That was his cradle, his crib. But why? Why wasn’t he placed in a real cradle or a bed of some sort? What’s she doing having her baby next to an animals’ feed trough? Obviously they’re in a stable of some sort. Again, why?

The traditional translation of Luke 2:7 says Jesus was in a manger because there was no room in the inn. We’ve figured that if there was an inn, there must have been an innkeeper and we’ve imagined stories about him. But Luke doesn’t say anything about an innkeeper. And, archeology has helped us understand better what houses were like in that time and

place. Many families kept their animals in the house, on a lower level, while the family lived in an upper room. So the stable could have been part of a house. And, a lot of scholars say that the word translated "inn" has a variety of meanings. In this case, it probably means something more like "guest room." What if they were in the home of some of Joseph's relatives? Because so many people had come to be registered, the guest room was already full. So Joseph and Mary went to the ground floor to stay in the stable.

Either way, this manger scene, which is so simple and bare, shows us how God humbles himself. He comes to us among common, poor people. He comes to us as a common, poor person. He uses whatever space is available. Michael Card has an interesting insight about this:

How many songs and sermons have tried to describe the monumental disconnect of the King of the Universe sleeping in a trough in a stable? Modern Christians sometimes lose patience with unbelievers. "How can they not believe?" ...But if we stand outside the stable and look in at the scene of the impoverished baby, wrapped in rags, I believe the correct response is, "They're never going to believe this!" (*Luke: The Gospel of Amazement* 48)

So the manger is a symbol of Jesus' humility. It's also the sign for the shepherds. An angel appeared to some shepherds in a field near Bethlehem. God's glory was revealed. The angel told the shepherds the good news about the birth of Jesus, the Savior, Messiah, and Lord. Then the angel says, "This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger" (v 12).

Luke mentions the manger three times in this story because the feeding trough was the sign to the shepherds. It told them which baby to look for. It showed them that the angel knew what he was talking about. It was important for the shepherds to get this news and these instructions because it was the shepherds who told who this child is. What's important is the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. The manger isn't important in itself. It's a signpost, a pointing finger, to who the child is and what he will do. If you

try to point something out to a dog, the dog will just look at your finger and not what you're pointing to. The manger points to who Jesus is and what his mission is. We look at him, not at the manger.

The shepherds are called in from the field. There's a connection with David, who was a shepherd and who was called in from the field to be anointed as king. The shepherds are given this news, "so that Mary and Joseph, hearing it from this unexpected source, will have extra confirmation of what up until now had been their own secret" (N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* 22).

When you see the manger on a card, or in church, don't stop at the crib. See what it's pointing to. It is pointing to the explosive truth that the baby lying there is already being spoken of as the true king of the world. The rest of Luke's story, both in the gospel and, later on, in Acts, will tell how he comes into his kingdom. (Wright 23-24)

So the manger is a symbol of Jesus' humility and it's a sign pointing to who Jesus is. The third mention of the manger in the story tells about when the shepherds found Mary and Joseph—and the baby, who was lying in the manger. They found it just as they had been told. The angel's word was confirmed. The good news was true. And the shepherds started telling others the good news about this birth, about the one who was born.

We sent out announcements when our children were born. Rachel and Zach sent out announcements about Charlie's birth. The beginning of a new life is something to rejoice about and to announce, to tell others about. Can we be at least as excited about the birth of Jesus the Savior, Messiah, and Lord? Can we announce that he has come? Can we tell people about him? Are we excited about the beginning of our new life in Christ when we turn to him in faith? Can we tell that good news?

Songs of Christmas help us hear and tell the good news. *Away in a Manger* can help us rejoice over the birth of Jesus and proclaim who he is.

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
the little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head.

The stars in the sky looked down where he lay,
the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay.

Jesus, even as an infant, is the Lord. He's the embodiment of the Lord God of Israel. He's God-with-us, even in a stable, even in a manger. The stars that he made shine upon him.

I know this is a children's song, so it's appropriate to call him "the *little* Lord Jesus." But we don't want to see him forever as the *little* Lord Jesus. We don't want to be like Ricky Bobby, Will Farrell's character in the movie *Talladega Nights*, who prays to "Dear Lord Baby Jesus...Eight Pound, Six Ounce, Newborn Infant Jesus." When his wife points out that Jesus did grow up, he says, "When I pray, I like the Christmas Jesus best." Then others around the table start talking about how they like to picture Jesus. We tend to see Jesus in the way that makes us most comfortable (see James Bryan Smith, *The Magnificent Story* 89-90).

Now, God the Son really did become human. He was born a real human baby so we could relate to him, so we'd have to hold him close. But, of course, he did grow up. We can't control Jesus and keep him in the manger forever. He's the Savior who grew up, the Lord who experienced and redeemed human life at every stage.

The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes,
but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes;
I love thee, Lord Jesus, look down from the sky
and stay by my cradle till morning is nigh.

"No crying he makes"? Of course, this is a lullaby. Someone was trying to get a child not to cry and to go to sleep. We can excuse the author for exaggerating here and saying Jesus didn't cry. But surely he did. Again, he became truly and fully human. Crying and tears are part of being human. God became one of us. We cry, so Jesus must have cried. We're grateful for a baby's cry because it's the sound of life, a protest against being rudely removed from a warm safe place, and a declaration to the world, "I have arrived!"

And in the manger wouldn't be the last place Jesus cried. He wept over the city and over the death of his friend Lazarus. "He offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death" (Hebrews 5:7). I wonder if he still weeps over us because he loves us so much (see Howell 105-06).

Away in a Manger helps us trust God's comfort and care. It leads us in prayer. It helps us see a little bit of Jesus' greatness and humility—the Lord in a feed trough.

In *The Last Battle*, the final book in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, there's a stable that's at the center of a battle between armies of good and evil. The evil ones call the stable a shrine to their god and they toss people into it as a sacrifice. But when Tirian, the last king of Narnia, is thrown into the stable, he finds himself in a beautiful open country. He meets other former kings and queens of Narnia, including the children from our world who first went there. The stable door still stands on a hill. Tirian can walk around it, but when he peeks through it, he can see the night of the world he left a little bit ago.

"It seems, then," said Tirian, smiling himself, "that the Stable seen from within and the Stable seen from without are two different places."

"Yes, " said the Lord Digory. "Its inside is bigger than its outside."

"Yes," said Queen Lucy. "In our world too, a Stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world" (140-41).

The Savior, the Messiah, the Lord lay in a manger in a stable in Bethlehem. He came for us, to be one of us, to be with us, to cry with us, to show us God's way to be human, to die for us, to be raised from the dead and take us with him into the new creation.

The third verse of *Away in a Manger* gives us a prayer to pray in Advent and all of our days. We want to know that Jesus is with us, is close to us. We want to know his love. We want him to bless all his children and care for us. We want the Lord to prepare us for our eternal home with him. Would you make this your prayer?

Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay
close by me forever, and love me, I pray;
bless all the dear children in thy tender care,
and fit us for heaven to live with thee there.

(The United Methodist Hymnal #217)