



MYSTERY OF THE MANGER

A few days ago, I saw an old, homeless man digging a container full of garbage. Apparently, he was trying to find something there that was of value to him. Strangely enough, this scene immediately made me think of Christmas. Let me explain. The moment I saw the man digging in the dumpster, looking for something valuable, it spoke to me. It spoke to me of our world that has turned into a humongous dumpster because of sin. Because of sin, our world is sadly filled with darkness and dirt, but when God looks at it, He sees it full of treasures. And that's why more than 2000 years ago, He decided to send down His Son Jesus, who came to "seek and the save the lost". Jesus chose to jump into this dumpster to look for and rescue the lost treasures – namely us. And this is why we celebrate Christmas!

When Jesus, the Son of God came into this world, he left His glory and came as a helpless little baby, born in a very lowly stable full of animals, dirt and darkness where it probably also stank quite like in a dumpster. His arrival went unnoticed by most people as He didn't make a big deal of himself when He came but entered our world quietly and humbly. God announced the coming of His Son to the world but did it in a rather unusual way. And there was a reason for that. The announcement of the birth of the Son of God was not made to a king in a palace. It was not made to a priest in a temple. It was not made to the wealthy or to the most important people in the land. The announcement of the birth of the Messiah, the One who would grow up to die on a cross for the sins of the "lost treasures" of the dumpster, was made to a group of shepherds. Have you ever wondered why? I never really thought about this more closely, until I read a few interesting things about shepherds and who they were in the society of that time.

Unlike the romanticized pictures of shepherds on the fields that we see in illustrated children's Bibles, the life of an ancient shepherd was anything but glorious. It was really tough. It was a life for loners who were often treated like a bunch of losers. Shepherds were seen as outsiders, looked down on, ridiculed, and despised by the rest of the community. In other words, they were the ones on the very bottom of the dumpster.

Their reputation was so bad that they were not permitted to give testimony in a court because they were thought to be plain dishonest. And yet, to the very ones the world would not even allow to give witness in court, God chooses to announce the birth of His Son and make them witnesses of it. Nobody ever told shepherds any good news, but God did. When the angels appeared to the shepherds on the field and proclaimed their message of hope and peace, this was one of the first times that God spoke to the people after a 400-year-silence, and he chose to speak to the shepherds, to the rejected of their time. They were the first people to hear about the coming of Jesus and also the first ones to tell others about it. The silenced ones, the despised ones suddenly became first hand eye witnesses and ambassadors of good tidings that changed the course of the whole mankind. The Bible tells us that "when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ***"Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us."*** ***And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds."*** Luke 2:15-18.

Now, in the light of all that we just learnt about the shepherds of that time, it makes one wonder, why on earth would God announce this historic, breaking news to these particular people and how on earth did the shepherds actually believe it all and check it out. And not only that – they became the first "evangelists" who spread the news of Jesus' birth everywhere they went. There is an explanation for all this and I find it fascinating.

I've read that in the ancient Israel, mangers were animal feeding troughs made of stone, not wood as they are portrayed in a modern day nativity scene. These stone troughs were obviously not comfortable, but they were great for protection. The town of Bethlehem was famous for lambs that were raised for the sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem.

The priests who made these sacrifices, would put the newborn lambs in the stone feeding troughs in order to keep them safe. But not just any newborn lambs - only the perfect, spotless lambs that were used as a sacrifice for atonement of sins. These lambs had to be without any blemish and so in order to keep them safe, the priests would wrap them tightly in a cloth and place them in the manger. Therefore, it is no coincidence or a meaningless little detail in Jesus' birth story that a manger is mentioned. The angel told the shepherds: ***"Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloth, lying in a manger."*** Luke 2:10-12. When the shepherds heard this and found Jesus in the manger just as the angel had said, it spoke volumes to them! They understood this powerful parallel because they knew what the cloth and the manger meant! They understood that **THIS BABY** in the manger would be **THE PERFECT LAMB OF GOD!** The Messiah who would sacrifice His life for the sake of the whole world. The One who free willingly would leave His glory and dive into this dumpster of sin to rescue the treasures made in His own image – you and me. He wasn't just an ordinary baby wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger, He was GOD Himself: perfect, sinless and holy, humbling Himself to become the perfect sacrifice in order to reconcile us back to Himself! The shepherds had the revelation of who this baby was! And this revelation changed their lives. They became bold witnesses of the Good News that we still more than 2000 years later celebrate every Christmas.

I pray that this Christmas, we all will receive a fresh and personal revelation of who this baby born in Bethlehem truly is, and that it sparks a new passion in our hearts to go and tell others about Him. Next year, we as Awake the Nations will again be crisscrossing "the big dumpster", looking for the lost treasures, bringing them the message of salvation, hope and healing. Thank you for standing together with us in this enormous task! We love and appreciate you and wish you a joyful and blessed Christmas time as you celebrate the coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!



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