

**SERMON: 2018/12/24 (Christmas Eve, Yr. C) - Micah 5:2-5a; 'The Song of Mary'; and, Luke 1:39-45, 56, 2:1-7 \_BTR**

Where was Jesus born?

Perhaps this seems like a stupid question to ask on this night of all nights.  
Especially by a pastor!  
Shouldn't I know?

The answer is sooo obvious, why even ask?

After all, my mantelpiece at home - above the stockings, that is - is littered with cards wishing me a "Merry Christmas," and on them is pictured, for all to see, the Christ-child, "Jesus," surrounded by animals in the unmistakable, drafty, modest wooden surroundings of...*a stable*.

And that's the end of the matter, isn't it?

Case closed.

Or is it?

Let's look again.

Consider, for starters, our reading from *Luke*.

He was *very* proud of having written an *accurate* account of Jesus' life and ministry - one *firmly* grounded in the testimony of reliable, sober(!) eyewitnesses.

[See 1:1-4]

And what does he tell us?

He speaks plainly of Jesus, the Savior, having been born in 'a manger' [v.7] - that's a feeding-tough for livestock, which was a *highly* unusual place for Him to have been laid by His parents who, remember, had been told - in no uncertain terms - *by angels* - that *this* was the Creator-of-the-Universe Himself.

Such a miraculous person deserved at least one of those grand, regal four-post beds; king-size, silk sheets.

You know the type!

*And in a palace.*

With servants and holy-men on every side *diligently* seeing to His every whim - not complacent cows or silly sheep.

But, essentially, Luke says *no* more:

He just repeats the detail about 'the manger' twice again during the visit of the shepherds [v.12 & 16], and offers a brief explanation for this odd choice of "crib" for God-incarnate, saying that 'there was no place for them in the inn.' [v.7]

In *Eastern* tradition, in the Greek and Slavic Churches, the consensus is that because Jesus was 'in a manger', His parents must have found shelter in a cave, and that Luke simply neglects to mention it.  
And this is what you'll see in many icons.

And there's good reason to think so.

The very earliest authorities in the Church - like the bishop and theologian, "Justin Martyr" in AD 150 - claimed it was a cave on the outskirts of the town *rather* than a *man*-made structure where Mary gave life to the 'King of kings'.

And, sure enough, many families in modern Bethlehem - *at this very moment* - use natural hollows and recesses in the soft limestone cliff on which it stands for their goats and animals. [n.1]

But perhaps you're sitting there and thinking to yourself:

"Why does this even matter?"

"Of what consequence is it whether a stable or a cave?"

Or maybe you're feeling antagonized that I should even cast any doubt on the subject at all?

Well, indulge me for another minute or so:

According to Matthew's account, the manger was actually in a 'house'.

Let me read to you from chapter 2, and the Evangelist's description of the arrival of the Wisemen.

I quote: 'When they had heard [Herod], they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star... until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. [And o]n entering *the house*, they saw the child with Mary His mother; and they knelt down and paid Him homage.' [v.9-11]

Was this a slip of the pen?

A "typo"?

Not likely.

Most homes in old Palestine were *single* room dwellings.

We're given evidence of this very thing in the New Testament: speaking during the "Sermon on the Mount," the Lord said: 'No one lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp-stand [where] it gives light to *all* in the house.'

In other words, common people - like the Judean relatives of Joseph, a carpenter - shared *one* space and with any pets too.

It made the most sense in the (cold) winter-time.

Lots of hot bodies together: furry and non-furry.

And here I come to my point:

The Holy Family weren't alone in some remote, solitary stable on that first Christmas, *more* likely, then, they had been invited to spend the night in somebody else's most intimate and personal place - their bedroom.[n.2]

This makes the most sense too of what we know about Middle Eastern culture - of the premium that is placed in that region on being hospitable.

It would have been absolutely unthinkable in that context to turn away a pregnant mother in labor - a source of public shame.[n.3]

Some stranger, in other words, despite the mess and disturbance of Christ's birth, embraced that unhygienic chaos and made it their own that night.

And so have set an example for us all to follow for all time.

Do you know that there are over two hundred foster children in Warren County this evening, many of them sleeping on couches and the floor?

God asks us not to throw some money at this problem - *and similar*, holding such at arm's length - but to bring it into our very homes - our livingrooms - as He was once taken in.

This is a message from the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

#### Footnotes:

1. Barclay, William (2001), *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume I*, Louisville, K. Y.: Westminster John Knox Press, 28.
2. Bailey, Kenneth (2008), *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*, Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, 34.
3. *Ibid.*, 35-36.

See Also: Paul, Ian (3rd of December, 2018), 'Once More: Jesus was not Born in a Stable', *Psephizo*, available at <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/once-more-jesus-was-not-born-in-a-stable/>