

Getting to the Manger

Nashville UCC, December 30, 2018

I have arrived at a time in my life when I am very glad that I no longer have to travel during the holidays. This year I was delighted that my family came to *us*. Fred and I were able to sit on the sofa in our decorated living room, enjoy the glow of the Christmas tree, and wait for our daughters and their families to burst through the front door! But it hasn't always been that way. We have done our share of traveling at the holidays. For many years, Fred and I bundled up the girls in their winter coats, put our suitcases in the back of the van, packed a thermos of coffee, and headed off to the East Coast to see his family. Most of that traveling was done at night. Fred would come home after a day's work, we'd eat dinner, and then we'd begin a long night's drive with the girls asleep in the back seat.

What I remember most about those nights were the signs that regularly appeared along the road as we drove. They were large and easily seen: reflective green signs directed us to exits on the interstate; big billboards enticed us to stop at a hotel or a restaurant; and tall, brightly lighted logos alerted us to a gas station *at this exit!* They called attention to themselves, thrusting their glow through the winter darkness like huge flashlight beams. These signs are part and parcel of everyone's travel experiences. Even if we don't go long distances to visit family, when we drive to the mall, go out to eat, or treat ourselves to a movie, we rely on those big, brightly lighted signs to get us where we want to go.

But the sign that was the very foundation of Christmas wasn't brightly lighted at all. In fact, the shepherds had to look hard to find it! God's angel told them about it on the very first Christmas eve. After that angel announced the Messiah's birth, the shepherds were told that the sign that it had really happened would be a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. That sign isn't nearly as impressive as the McDonald's signs that tower above the trees at interstate exits! A swaddled baby lying in a manger? How ordinary! And how easily overlooked!

Have you ever thought about how difficult it was for the shepherds to get to the manger that first Christmas eve? The night was dark after the angels disappeared, even darker than usual in contrast with the glory that had just flooded the hillsides. And the shepherds had no street lights to guide their way. There must have been dozens of stables in the little village of Bethlehem; and the stable for which they were searching had no neon sign out front. They had to look through every single dark, dirty stable in town. To make matters worse, the village was crowded with other temporary residents who had been required to travel there. I imagine that there were many folks beside Mary and Joseph who had taken refuge in a stable. To get to the manger of the Christ child, the shepherds had to search through dozens of crowded stables in the dark of night. They must have wondered why God had given them a sign that was so hard to find! It must have been especially puzzling since this sign announced the birth of the Messiah.

I've often wondered what the shepherds saw as they went trying to get to the Messiah's manger. They must have seen the worst in life as they went looking for the best. They probably saw travelers who had gone to bed hungry: travelers who had no money to buy food and no family to help them get any. They probably saw beggars and orphaned children on the streets, tucked into a dark corner trying to catch a few winks of sleep in the cold. They

might even have passed lepers on their way into Bethlehem, men and women who were exiled from society as they died slowly from their incurable disease. And as the shepherds passed by all this pain and suffering, they must have wondered whether the Messiah had really been born into a broken world such as ours. But when they got to the manger and found the baby who was wrapped in swaddling clothes lying there – then they *knew* that God had indeed been come into our midst to save us from ourselves!

It isn't any easier for us to get to the manger today than it was for the shepherds. The signs of Christ's presence are still hard to find. We look around, and we see poverty and death and greed and corruption, just like the shepherds might have seen on their way to the manger; and we wonder whether the Messiah is really here at all. That's why, every now and then, someone will ask, "Why doesn't God give us a sign to show us that he is still around?" When they ask that question, they're looking for a sign that is big and impressive, like a lighted Cracker Barrel billboard. But that's not the kind of sign that the shepherds were told to look for. The sign that helped them get to the manger was as ordinary as can be – just a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes.

Maybe we should be looking for something ordinary, too, to help us get to the manger of that very *extraordinary* child. Maybe, instead of looking for lighted billboards, we should be looking for little signs that are almost invisible unless we're looking for them – signs of hospitality, compassion, acceptance, and love – signs that are easy to miss because they are overshadowed by all the bad news that we hear every day. But they're out there for us to find if we search for them. In every place where there are homeless families living in cardboard boxes, here there are also compassionate people who offer them food, clothing, and blankets. Where there are hateful actions directed towards Muslims or Jews or homosexuals, there are loving groups of people who rally around those persecuted communities. And where there is loneliness – in nursing homes, or hospitals, or just in the homes of older adults who have outlived their friends and their families – there are loving folks who are trying their best to ease that loneliness. Those are the kinds of signs that point the way to the manger today. Oh, it's not easy for us to find the Christ child, because we no longer have a physical manger to find. Today, we have to get to that manger through human hearts. But the good news of Christmas is that the Christ child is always here for us to find. His name is Emmanuel: God with us. And that's exactly where he is, today and forever: with us. Thanks be to God!