

A Lesson from a Manger (Luke 2:11-12)

Pastor Kelly Sensenig

A little boy wrote a letter to Santa Claus that said, “Dear Santa: There are three boys living at my house. Jeffrey is two, David is four, and Norman is seven. Jeffrey is good some of the time, David is good some of the time, and Norman is good all of the time. I am Norman.”

If you know anything about Christmas, you know about Mary and the angel Gabriel, about the dangerous journey to Bethlehem, about Caesar’s decree, about Herod’s insane jealousy, about the inn with a “No Vacancy” sign, about the angels and the shepherds, and about the mysterious Wise Men from the east. All of these biblical narratives are well known, and we repeatedly hear them. But if we are not careful, we won’t really hear these stories anymore because we’ve heard them all before.

Like many things, when we are familiar with something, it can breed a kind of casual disinterest in it. We must be careful about developing a disinterest in the Christmas story. There are unexpected miracles on every hand in the Christmas story. And after all, it tells the most amazing story: that God invaded human history in the form of a tiny, helpless baby.

One of the best ways to fight against the tendency to sleep through another Christmas sermon is to focus on the little details. Sometimes it helps to take out the microscope and study just a few tiny fragments of the story. By looking closely at a small part, we may see the whole event in a new light.



With this in mind, let’s focus our attention on the Christmas story and see what it says to us this Christmas season. There are several verses I have in mind that come from the first Christmas sermon. It was a sermon that was preached by an angel to some very frightened shepherds. I want to focus on some of the ordinary things in the Christmas story that we

sometimes miss. The primary focus will be on the manger scene where Christ was born. But everything leading up to the birth of a baby in a manger seems very ordinary.

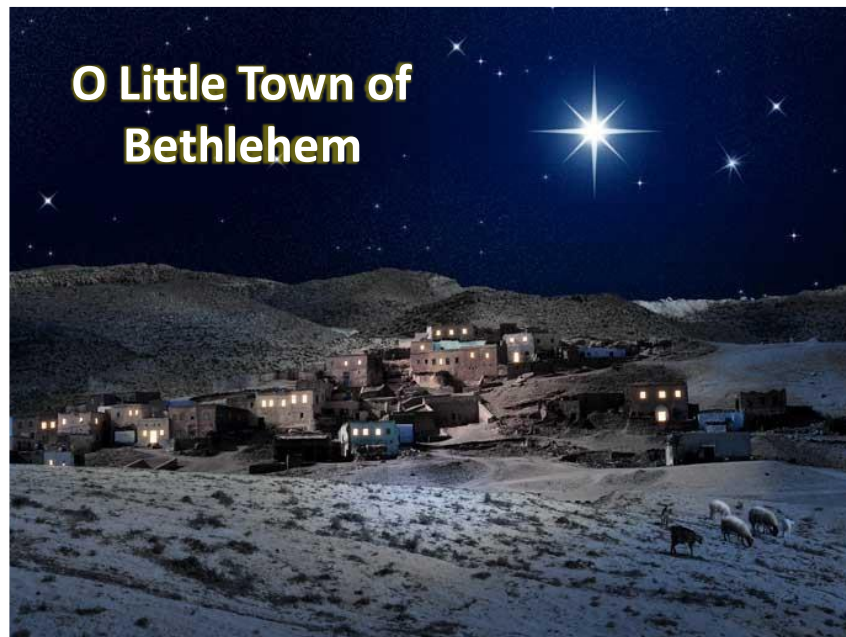
What is the main lesson we learn from the manger?
God can use something ordinary and make it extraordinary.

This truth is seen in two ways.

1. Christ was born in an ordinary place.

Luke 2:11

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord”



Of course, the city of David was Bethlehem. We sometimes forget how utterly unprepared the shepherds were to hear those words and how awesome they must have sounded. A Savior had been born! The Messiah had come! The Lord from Heaven is here! And in all places that could have been chosen Christ was born in the obscure town called Bethlehem!

Micah 5:2 echoes the Christmas prophecy:

“But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, *though* thou be little among the thousands of Judah, *yet* out of thee shall he come forth unto me *that is* to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth *have been* from of old, from everlasting.”

The town of Bethlehem was little. It was a very small place. Jesus was born in a smelly stall on the backside of this tiny town. Bethlehem was a very small town that was included in the 1,000 towns dotted across Judah. It was so small and obscure that it probably should not have been included with the others. This is why someone compiled these words in a familiar Christmas song:

“One small child in a land of a thousand
One small dream of a savior tonight
One small hand reaching out to the starlight
One small savior of life.
See Him lying a cradle beneath Him
See Him smiling in the stall
See His mother praising His Father
See His tiny eyelids fall
See the shepherds kneeling before Him
See the kings on bended knee
Oh, See the mother praising the Father
See the Blessed infant sleep.”

Bethlehem was a little town six miles to the south of Jerusalem. In the olden days it had been called Ephratah (meaning fruitful). This little town would be fruitful in one specific way. It would be the very small and insignificant town where the eternal God and Savior of mankind was born.

We see from the very beginning of the Christmas story that God uses ORDINARY things (like the place called Bethlehem) and makes them into something EXTRAORDINARY. The obscure place of Bethlehem became famous. And it is still famous to this day.

The "little town" of Bethlehem mentioned in various Christmas carols attracts pilgrims worldwide because of its description in the New Testament (particularly

the Gospels) as the birthplace of Jesus. The Church of the Nativity, one of the oldest churches in the world, is the focus of worship within the city.

Let's reflect on who came forth from this little and obscure place called Bethlehem. It was Christ Himself who one day would be the ruler over Israel during the Millennium as spoken by the prophets. Regarding Christ, He would come out of eternity past as part of the Trinity or triunity of the Godhead and be born in this little obscure place ("whose goings forth *have been* from of old, from everlasting"). The Bible teaches the eternal existence of Christ. He shares the existence of the eternal and everlasting God within the Godhead.

Little Bethlehem would be the hometown that would bring forth the Creator and sustainer of the universe – the eternal God of the ages. You see, God can take ordinary things and make them extraordinary. Such was the case with Bethlehem. From a practical perspective, we need to remember this in relation to our own personal lives. God can use us, a common and ordinary person, and do great things through us for His glory. We must simply open our hearts to God and be willing to be used of Him. God wants to use us as humble vessels to accomplish wonderful things through us.

James 5:17-18

"Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are (a common man and person), and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit."

God used a common man like Elijah to do extraordinary things through his prayer life. God wants to use us today and this New Year to bring blessings upon others. If God can use a small town like Bethlehem to bring forth the eternal God and Savior, then He can surely use us in ways that we could never imagine. Never doubt what God can do through you and how He wants to use you. Remember Bethlehem.

"God uses ordinary people,
He chooses people, just like me and you,
Who are willing to do as He commands.

God uses people that will give him all
No matter how small your all may seem to you.
Because little becomes much
As you place it in the master's hands.”

A small and insignificant town was the birthplace of the Savior! In the Christmas story, God uses small things and makes them into great things.

Such a Babe in such a place,
Can He be the Savior?

Can Christ really be your Savior? The answer is yes! Why? It’s because God can use something ordinary and make it extraordinary. The ordinary birth of a baby would one day result in Christ extraordinary sacrifice on the cross to save us. This is why the world wants to get rid of Jesus. They don’t want to face their sins and need for the entrance of the Savior into the world.

Efforts to scrub Christianity from our culture, even our history are growing in this post-Christian era. Nowhere is this more evident than in the ever-widening epidemic of the vandalizing and theft of Christmas Nativity scenes, specifically the theft of Baby Jesus. Just look at these recent headlines.

- Vintage Baby Jesus, other nativity props stolen from Alexander County church
- Grinch Strikes Again, Baby Jesus is Missing – Again!
- Stolen Baby Jesus returned to local restaurant’s Nativity scene
- Surprising number of people stealing baby Jesus from nativity scene
- Baby Jesus stolen from nativity scene in Solihull
- Statue of baby Jesus stolen from Grosse Pointe Farms church's nativity display
- Man Runs Off With Baby Jesus Stolen From Sundance Square Nativity Scene

Some people are giving up and just not putting out their annual displays. Others are looking for a solution, and even for protection. As one news station has reported: As Christmas approaches, many people are looking for divine intervention, or in some cases insurance to prevent more trouble in Bethlehem. "There is a company that will insure your manger set. There's a company that has a special ‘baby Jesus’

rider for churches and for stores,” said Pastor James Carney of Seattle Capitol Hill Presbyterian Church, whose church display has been vandalized repeatedly.”

What is behind the stealing of baby Jesus? People are trying to hide from Him, but they cannot hide Him, dismiss Him, diminish Him, or extinguish Him. Try as they may, they cannot rob the world of Baby Jesus. John 1:5 says, “And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.”

2. Christ was born in an ordinary way.

Luke 2:12 goes on to say:

“And this *shall be* a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger” (animal stall a feeding trough where animals were fed).



Not only was Christ born in an ordinary place; He was also born in an ordinary way. The Christmas story reveals that baby Jesus had a very humble entrance into this world. It’s a Biblical narrative that might seem MUNDANE and ORDINARY and heard in many Christmas plays, programs, and pageants by children who are acting out their parts.

After announcing that a Savior had been born in Bethlehem, the angel tells the shepherds how to find the baby. “And this *shall be* a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes” or strips of cloth (Luke 2:12). The sign was that

God would become man and enter the world in an ordinary way. **God had become man in a very ordinary and mundane way in order to be the Savior of mankind.**

The angel mentions about “the sign” (the Greek contains the definite article = “the sign”) which is used to emphasize something. The Greek word is sēmeion (say-mi'-on) which generally refers to an unusual occurrence or supernatural sign from God that no one could miss. Like the parting of the Red Sea or Jesus walking on water or Christ rising from the dead. These events are “signs” that the God of the universe has intervened in human history.

Now verse 12 may sound a bit strange to our ears. “This will be the sign.” We might expect the next sentence to read, “And the moon will turn to blood and the stars will spell out the name Jesus.” We would think that something EXTARODINARY had to occur here since Jesus was born. But this part of the Christmas story is not like this. The “sign” from God is this: You will find a baby wrapped in “swaddling clothes.” This was a very ORDINARY sign. Although we know the baby was the Savior and God incarnate, the declaration of the sign was that Jesus would enter the world like any other ordinary baby.

What’s so special about a baby wrapped in strips of cloth in a manger? Luke 2:12 is telling us that the particular circumstances of Jesus’ birth are important even though they are viewed as ordinary. Jesus could have been born in any circumstances God chose (pomp and glory in a palace) but God chose ordinary circumstances. What is the message of the manger? What is God saying to us? What do we learn about the way that God works? I think the answer to this is that God sometimes chooses to work in ORDINARY ways to bring about EXTRAORDINARY results.

A common birth of a baby which was wrapped in cloths was to be an unusual and even miraculous sign for the world to see. Why? It’s because It was God who was humbly born into humanity, as a baby, the eternal Creator who had come to save mankind. Therefore, a common sign (a baby wrapped in cloths) became something amazing, distinguished, spectacular, unbelievable and even miraculous! God had used something mundane and turned it into something spectacular!

The early church father Chrysostom called this sign:
“A tremendous and wonderful sign.”

This ordinary sign reveals three things about Christ.

I. His Humanity—"You will find a babe"

This is very ordinary. "A baby." That's all the Greek says. The word means "an infant" or a "newborn child." It is a totally ordinary word used to describe the birth of a child. This tells us that Christ came into the world just as we all do. It should be remembered that something miraculous occurred nine months earlier when Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit

Matthew 1:20

"While he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost."

The conception of Jesus was miraculous. But in one sense, the physical birth of Jesus was completely normal or as normal as it could be given the unique circumstances. And yet the angel states that what appears to be a normal birth of a baby wrapped in cloths was also a wonderful and miraculous sign that had occurred. Why? It's because God had humbly come to earth to be the Savior. God has become man and demonstrated great humility in doing so.

To say that Christ was born as a baby brings us face to face with the truth of the Incarnation. Even though it seemed ordinary, it was something wonderful. God had come into the world as a baby. God had taken on human flesh. I Timothy 3:16 tells us that "Great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh." Yes, it is great! The word "great" (megas) means in this case something highly esteemed, momentous, extremely important.

John 1:14 brings out the teaching of the incarnation of Christ:

"And the Word was made flesh (birth and humanity of Christ), and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth."

We should love Christmas and the birth of Christ because it means that Jesus Christ was the Word (logos) or the very person who came to reveal God's eternal being and existence to mankind. The meaning of "logos" (translated as Word in our

English Bible) means a declaration or revelation. Jesus Christ was and is today the living statement, declaration, revelation, and communication of God's eternal being and existence.

John 1:18 explains it like this:

"No man hath seen God at any time (*in His eternal being and existence*); the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared *him*."

The word "declared" (*exēgeomai*) means to exegete, draw out, bring out, unfold, or declare as the KJV says. Christ exegetes God to mankind. The person of Jesus Christ full expounds, explains, and brings God out into the open – His nature and existence. This means that when Jesus Christ was born as a human and lived among humanity, He literally exegeted, unfolded, revealed God's eternal person and character to mankind. If we want to get really theological about it, Jesus was the divine and incarnate exegesis of God's person.

In some way mysterious to us, the Lord Jesus Christ was the Godman, two natures (human and divine) joining together in His one Person. This is the central truth of Christianity. God Himself had entered human history in order to provide for our salvation. What we could not do, God the Father did for us through his Son. Everything else flows from this wonderful truth of Christ's birth and incarnation. If he had not been born, he could not have died for our sins, and he would not have risen from the dead.

Jesus had to become like us in order to save us. There was no other way. He had to become a baby, flesh, humanity. Many battles have been fought over this basic truth. In the first century the battle raged over his genuine humanity. Did God really become a man? Some people said no. But the Bible condemns them as heretics if they reject Christ's humanity.

1 John 4:1-3 reminds us that to deny the humanity of Jesus Christ is to place yourself outside the boundary of Christianity. "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that *spirit* of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world."

When looking at the Scriptures, the Bible clearly reveals that Jesus was God in the flesh! He was the logos of God, exegeting God to mankind. Yes, the baby (just a little baby lying in a manger) was the eternal God and Creator. This turns an ordinary or mundane thing into an extraordinary or unusual sign of great importance. Yes, the baby in the manger was a “sign” - something amazing, spectacular and even miraculous because God became man!

The Jews today do not believe Jesus was the Messiah and God, even though many hold Jesus in high esteem. The Muslims do not believe this. They claim he was a great prophet sent by Allah, but they vigorously deny he was the Son of God. Such a thought is blasphemy to them.

The Hindus do not believe Jesus was God. In their religion, Jesus might be a god, one among millions of gods, but they do not believe that Jesus is the one-and-only Son of God who is God manifest in human flesh. But this is what Christians believe for the Bible reveals that Jesus Christ was the “logos” revelation of God’s being and existence. And the Bible verse in Luke 2:12 teaches us that the Lord from Heaven entered this earth as a tiny, helpless baby. He was the Godman = fully God and fully man. This was the sign of the ages! God had become man and was born as a baby in humble surroundings. God had taken something ordinary (the birth of a little baby) and made it extraordinary.

II. His Helplessness—“Wrapped in swaddling clothes”

Not only was the birth of a baby an ordinary thing, but so was the wrapping of the baby in cloths. In that day newborn babies were wrapped in strips of cloth to protect them from the harsh elements. Usually, mothers would wrap the arms and legs separately and then wrap the torso until the baby looked like an Egyptian mummy. This seems cruel, and indeed it severely restricted the child’s movements, but in a world with little medical care, where babies routinely died before their first birthday, it was a way to provide a crude kind of protection.

The term “swaddling clothes” translates the Greek word *sparganoō*, meaning “to swathe” or “to wrap.” It’s interesting that the Jews also wrapped their dead in strips of cloth, just as they did their infants. Some suggest that this is part of the special sign at Christ’s birth in that the wrapping of baby Jesus was a reminder of the death

that would inevitably follow someday. There may be something to this. The angel specifically mentions the baby would be wrapped in cloths and this undoubtedly was for a specific reason which was to remind that Jesus Christ came into the world to die for the world or lost humanity. The mention of the binding cloths was for a reason – to take us to Calvary’s cross – to remind us of the true reason why Jesus has entered the world.

Luke 2:11

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.”

What do we learn from the binding of baby Jesus? He came as a helpless baby bound in cloths to ultimately die for those who were helplessly bound to sin, lost and need of a Savior. Looking at the baby this way (in swaddling clothes), no one can say He came only for the rich and powerful. He came for all mankind.

Matthew 1:21

“And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.”

1 Timothy 4:10

“For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe.”

Jesus came into the world not just to save a few but to be the Savior for all mankind. You see, Jesus was bound in swaddling clothes so that we might NOT be bound to sin but freed to live a victorious and spiritually productive life.

III. His Humility—“Lying in a manger”

Luke 2:12

“And this *shall be* a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.”

This was also ordinary. One problem we have with the story is that the word “manger” (phatnē) doesn’t easily communicate a clear image to us. Many of us get our concept of a “manger” from watching yearly Christmas pageants at

churches. But the word itself means something like a stable or perhaps a feeding-trough. In fact, during the first century some stables were often nothing more than a circle of stones around a hollowed-out cave in the side of a hill.

Now reflect on this. Here was Jesus. This newborn baby lying forgotten in an exposed stable, resting in a feeding-trough and this little baby was God's appointed "sign" to each one of us that He has entered the human race to take away our sins and rescue us from hell.

God has come to the world in a most unlikely way. It was a very humble or humiliating way. Born on the backside of Bethlehem in a smelly stable. This is what Philippians 2:7 means when it says that he "made himself of no reputation, and took upon himself the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men." This speaks of Christ's kenosis and humble birth into the world to become part of the human race. Nothing about the baby Jesus appeared supernatural. There were no halos, no angels visible, and no choirs singing. If you had been there, and if you had no other information, you would have concluded that this was just a baby born to a poor young couple down on their luck.

Folks, if you are looking for Jesus, don't start in the nursery. Go outside to the barn and find the oldest part where the boards need repair, and the ground is covered with dirt, and the air smells of manure. When you hear the baby's cry, you'll know you've found Jesus - the Lord of Glory. He's not in the nursery with the rest of the children; he's out in the barn with the animals.

William MacDonald made this remark:

"The second part of the sign was that He would be lying in a manger. It is doubtful that the shepherds had ever seen a baby in such an unlikely place. This indignity was reserved for the Lord of life and glory when He came into our world. It makes our minds dizzy to think of the Creator and Sustainer of the universe entering human history not as a conquering military hero, but as a little Babe. Yet this is the truth of the Incarnation."

"Down from His glory,
Ever living story,
My God and Savior came,
And Jesus was His Name.

Born in a manger,
To His own a stranger,
A Man of sorrows, tears and agony.”

Nothing about the outward circumstances of Christ’s birth pointed to God. But God was totally in it! He was in the mundane and ordinary! This reminds us that God used the ordinary to do something extraordinary! Jesus came into the world as a baby, wrapped in cloths, lying in a manger, so He might die on the cross and do something extraordinary – save our souls!

Luke 2:11 -12

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this *shall be* a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.”

God had arrived on the world scene in the flesh. Jesus was God in the flesh. But somehow the world missed God’s simple sign – a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger. We know that the Jews were looking for a Messiah. Even Herod’s scribes knew that Micah 5:2 predicted that Christ would be born in Bethlehem. And yet, many missed the event of the birth of the Messiah and also missed the Messiah Himself.

John 1:11 says:

“He came unto his own and his own receive him not”

Why did so many people not recognize the Messiah when he came? It’s because they could not see the divine in the ordinary. Therefore, they missed Him altogether! The Jews were looking for something spectacular, a political messiah who would deliver them from Roman domination. The Jews wanted “a sign,” but they weren’t expecting a baby in a manger. God gave them a sign and they missed it. It was too simple then and for many people today it is still too simple. They simply cannot believe that Jesus Christ came into the world to be their Savior.

A baby born in a manger. It seems so ordinary, but it was actually something that was extraordinary! God had come into the world to bridge the gap between God

and man! And He entered the earth in a humble way to ultimately bring mankind salvation.

1 Timothy 2:5

“For *there is* one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”

The people had missed the entrance of Messiah into the world. They were looking for pomp and pageantry – not a little, insignificant birth of an ordinary baby born in a stinky stable filled with manure.

“They all were looking for a King
To slay their foes and lift them high:
Thou cam’st, a little baby thing
That made a woman cry.”

So here is our main lesson. God uses little things to accomplish great things! Let us not miss how God can work through ordinary things and do great things (extraordinary things) even though they might seem small and insignificant to us.

Zechariah 4:10 describes the rebuilding of the temple in this way:

“For who hath despised the day of small things? for they shall rejoice, and shall see the plummet in the hand of Zerubbabel *with* those seven; they *are* the eyes of the LORD, which run to and fro through the whole earth.”

Little is much when God is in it! God can use insignificant things to do great things in the hearts and lives of others. Such was the case with the ordinary and humble birth of the Savior!

God’s seemingly small things can be used in a tremendous way. For instance, God can use small, ORDINARY, and seemingly insignificant things that we do to help others such as writing a letter of encouragement, giving a gift to someone, providing help and showing kindness to others, giving some wise counsel. In fact, God can turn these things into something EXTRAORDINARY. The seemingly ordinary things, a simple act of kindness, stepping out to help someone, praying for someone, can result in great and wonderful things taking place in the hearts of others. It can bring sunshine into their heart and have a lasting impact upon them.

The Christmas story of a baby born in a manger reminds us that God can take what is seemingly small and insignificant and turn it around into something that can change the lives of people. Never underestimate God and what He can do! God is the God of Great Surprises! Romans 11:33 reminds us that “his ways are past finding out” or His paths cannot be traced! The way He works is way beyond us!

To me it is reassuring that behind Christmas stands a God of great surprises. He does what He wants, and He doesn't ask for human counsel. I suppose that from our limited perspective, sometimes His ways make no sense to us (Isa. 55:9). However, this is a great comfort because it reminds me again that He is God, and I am not.

The night of Christ's birth, if you had walked by, nothing would have seemed supernatural. Mangers were not the beautiful clean places we see in our Christmas pageants. They are lonely, dirty, smelly places made for animals. Again, this was not a likely beginning for God's entrance into the world: So we come to the end of the story! God's surprising sign is a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and resting in a feeding-trough in a cave behind a village inn. It's not a very likely beginning for Jesus Christ who was the Creator and God of the universe and the movement of Christianity that would change the world. This Christmas story is a rebuke to those who love pomp and outward glory, and to those who despise the small things that God does.

Jesus was once a “small thing” himself. To borrow a phrase from Martin Luther, “He whom the worlds cannot enwrap yonder lies in Mary's lap.” Yes, this is surely a strange way for a Savior to enter the world. Even the poorest child would not be found in a manger, but there He was, God's appointed “sign” from Heaven. God has become man. He humbly entered the world as a baby, wrapped in cloths, lying in a manger. **God had become man in a very ordinary and mundane manner and He entered the world as the Savior without pomp and pageantry.**

- If the world had needed education, God would have sent a teacher.
- If the world had needed an army, God would have sent a general.
- If the world had needed more money, God would have sent a banker.

But since the world needed a Savior, God sent a baby! And this is the surprise, the wonder, and ultimately the delight of Christmas. God did what we would never

have done, and in so doing, he opened the door to Heaven for all of us to we can be saved through the giving of His Son.

John 3:16

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

The lesson of the manger and Christmas story reminds us of the greatness in little things! God takes what seems to be small and mundane things, ORDINARY things, and changes them into the EXTRAORDINARY! This is the lesson and message of the manger!

“One small child in a land of a thousand
One small dream of a savior tonight
One small hand reaching out to the starlight
One small savior of life.”