

The Manger

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Luke 2.8-20

*And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. 10And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 14"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" 15When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." 16And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. 17And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. 18And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. 19But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. 20And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

This time of the year is full of music – you hear it in the stores and sometimes even some of the great carols and sacred music is heard in public.

The Christian Church has a deep well of ancient and profound songs for this time of the year.

I've been sort of obsessed with one ancient song by a composer you may not know: Michael Anthony Orlando Cassavitis.

The song on my mind is about a warrior who is taken prisoner and held in a dungeon or prisoner-of-war camp and before his release, he's able to send a letter to his beloved... He's been gone a long time and he doesn't know if she's "moved on" (as we say) so he hopes that she'll still be interested when he returns home.

So he asks his beloved to give him some indication of her intentions... in a kind of NON-THREATENING way. He says, "I'll ride by your house and if I see indicator, this sign then I'll know I still have a shot..."

"What IS the sign?", you ask. Well some of you have figured it out that this isn't an ancient song (except to our many young people) It was actually written in 1973 and Michael Anthony Orlando Cassavitas dropped his first and last names and goes by the stage name, "Tony Orlando" and the song is called "Tie a Yellow Ribbon 'Round the Old Oak Tree" – It was the song of the year in 1973...sold 3 million records in the first three weeks... You may think it's kinda cheesy/syrupy but it's actually really well written and...touching.

You feel the prisoner's anxiety as he approaches the woman's home... WILL THERE BE THE YELLOW RIBBON? Will it be there? Will it be visible? Will she still love him or even remember him – (it's been three long years...will you still want me?)?

He can't bear to look...

"Bus driver, please look for me...'Cause I couldn't bear to see what I might see...I'm really still in prison and my love, she holds the key...A simple yellow ribbon's what I need to set me free...I wrote and told her please..."

And then that ...ending...that touching ending (his eyes are closed – what'll it be?): Now the whole darn bus is cheerin'; And I can't believe I see, A hundred yellow ribbons round the ole oak tree, I'm comin' home... I'm coming home... "

The story of the shepherds is packed with meaning and it has a lot of elements we COULD think about... angels... "Glory to God in the highest..." --- but I just want to look at ONE ELEMENT – the indicator...the sign... this time NOT a yellow ribbon but a manger - "This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

I want to consider FOUR POSSIBLE meanings for this sign – what actually WAS the sign and what does it sign-i-fy (to what is it pointing? What's the significance? What does it mean?)

Well, these shepherds, were NOT high ranking members of society – they were not trusted (a lot of them stole sheep and sort of skulked around outside of town and in the NIGHT – as we find them here) but they're visited by angels who say that Messiah has arrived – here's what to look for - "A baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

Well this word, "sign" (σημεῖον – Gk) is a kind of technical term for something with ([as I said] SIGN-if-i-cance) So what is the sign saying to those shepherds (pastores – L)

I read an article in the latest issue of Christianity Today in which the writer says the sign is the swaddling clothes and the meaning is that GOD IS GIVING HIMSELF TO BE BOUND –

God has landed and He has taken to Himself a human body (with all it's limitations) and He will require someone to care for Him – God is humbling Himself.

And I like that – God is indeed being bound by His love for US... He is coming to take our responsibility... He is obligating Himself for His people... Swaddling clothes render the baby bound and this Baby – the God-Man is taking on the Divine part of the arrangement and the HUMAN part.

God is VERY serious about welcoming us home – the binding is a sign of that.

My good friend/colleague Dr John Stevenson goes a step further and adds that the sign is the MANGER itself.

It would almost certainly NOT have been made of WOOD (there wasn't a lot of WOOD available!) but a slab of stone.

It may have been hollowed out – an indentation to hold the hay or whatever they fed the animals but ... a baby wrapped in cloth and resting on a stone slab would have been UNUSUAL.

And it IS more than interesting that at the end of the story...this child... (by then a full grown man) would once again be found wrapped in cloth and laying on a stone slab, a shelf inside a cave that had been carved as a kind of mausoleum.

And SO the sign in this way of thinking is the first parenthesis in the whole story – and THIS was a device often used by ancient writers to show a symmetry to the whole story – this Baby has His start wrapped in cloth and lying on a stone table and will return to a stone table near the end of the story...

And of course – C.S. Lewis picked up on this imagery in The Chronicles of Narnia where Aslan gives his life for the guilty...and is sacrificed (as it were) on a stone table which then BREAKS – the curse of death is broken...

So this Baby comes into the world to live and die for all who trust Him...and then He will go again to the dreaded stone table and He will be the great Grave-Robber - He will die for my sins and rise – He will break the table and save us from death. A SIGN!

A third sign is that Jesus Christ is in Bethlehem and lying in a feeding trough.

Bethlehem means “House of Bread” – it may have been the site of an ancient bakery and may have been named for that.

And here is the One who will later refer to himself as “the Bread that comes down from Heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6.29ff)

Perhaps this is at least ONE aspect of this sign – SIGN-if-y-ing that in the House of Bread is food for the soul – that the Baby would live for me (and I will be credited with His perfect life – He lives for ME!) and that He would die – go into the Tomb (be bound by a covenant and wrapped in cloth) in order that I could have life – and He will sustain me... BE my spiritual food – THAT'S why He was put on a PLATTER, a feeding trough – because He IS the bread of life for all who take and eat.

Last – there's a little-known reference IN the Prophet Isaiah that may have been known to those shepherds and could have been for them the meaning of the sign: (Listen) "An ox knows its owner, and a donkey its master's manger, But Israel does not know, My people do not understand." (Isaiah 1.3)

Maybe THAT'S why the angel stood before those despised ruffians... it was a kind of mockery to human pride. “The scholars and clergymen are NOWHERE to be found, but God gives these no-bodies the inside information – My people don't know their Master's Manger – they don't recognize their LONG-AWAITED Savior – but HERE He is – a sign to YOU. “An ox knows its owner, and a donkey its master's manger, but Israel does not know, My people do not understand." (Isaiah 1.3)

That's where I want to end – and just simply ask – DO YOU?

Do you know where to get infinite relief from your bad record – all the things that bring you shame – your failings before God? Do you know that One who became bound for us?

Do you know Him WHOSE death has become our life – an unending source of forgiveness and purpose and spiritual life and food – He was placed on a platter in the House of Bread – are you eating?

Dumb animals can recognize their Master – can YOU? Or do you need a sign...Good News! We have one!

How wonderful if YOU would see the Yellow Ribbon – the hundred Yellow Ribbons and know that God is welcoming YOU home... Don't waste any more time: look at the Sign and come Home.