

Luke 2:1-7

“Even a Stable Is Home”

Christmas Eve 2011 Maple Grove UMC

In manger square in Bethlehem is a magnificent building called the Church of the Nativity. It is a grand basilica built over the site where tradition says Jesus was born. There are ornate columns, rich tapestries, an incredible mosaic floor, and an altar inlaid with gold—one of the most famous and striking churches in the world.

Now I suppose it is fitting to honor the place of our Lord’s birth with our finest architecture and art, with luxurious objects and stained glass. But the whole place really serves to remind us that things in that place were nothing like that when Jesus was born. He had no grand building, no crib, not even a modest inn to keep out the cold. What he had was a dirt floor and an animal feeder in the barn out back. It certainly wasn’t much. But here’s the thing: when it came for a place for God to be born, Jesus’ first home—even a stable was enough.

This fall Maple Grove has had the privilege of praying for a young man, Jack Stamets, a member of our church, who is in basic training with the Marines. Being new here, I haven’t met Jack. But his grandmother, Barbara, told us where he was going and asked us to pray for him. I put

Jack on my daily prayer list, as did so many others, and I took a couple of minutes to write him a note of encouragement. He wrote back immediately and we read his letter in worship a few weeks ago. He said, “I have received word that you at Maple Grove prayed for me, and I would like to thank you all for that. It may not seem like it but that means a lot to an 18 year-old boy like me. . . I have to try not to cry because I miss Maple Grove so much.”

It’s such a small thing—just saying a prayer and writing a card or two. It seems like we ought to do so much more for a young man serving his country. But when it came for a way for God to be born into boot camp, for an 18 year-old soldier to have a spiritual home away from home, it turns out even a stable is enough.

Sharon Allen, director of the Free Store down on Parsons Avenue, tells about a high school student who volunteered there one Friday years ago. At that time the soup kitchen across the street was only open Monday through Thursday, so there was nowhere for people to eat Friday, Saturday and Sunday. So the next time the young man came to the Free Store, he brought along a crock pot of soup. It was gone in about three minutes. So he told his church about this, and the next Friday a whole van load of

people came with lots of crock pots of soup. And over the years it has turned into an every-Friday free lunch of soup, homemade cookies, bread and hard-boiled eggs. It's called "Soup for the Soul," and has been going strong for eleven years, sometimes feeding up to 200 people a day.

It may not seem like much, one teenager with a pot of soup in the face of hundreds of hungry families. But here's the thing: when it comes to a place for God to be born, a lunchtime home for the homeless, it turns out that even a stable is a good start.

Another pastor told me about a couple in his church one Christmas Eve. They'd been married for 25 years, always in church together. But in all his years as their pastor, he'd never once seen them speak to each other with tenderness or touch one another with affection. They were married, but it was like there was a wall of ice between them. He didn't know what had taken in their marriage, though one could guess. But from up high where he preached, my friend could watch them that Christmas Eve. During the sermon she reached out her hand and touched the side of his hand. And he did not pull his hand back. No words were spoken. They didn't even look at each other. But they both wept all through Communion, and the next year things were different between them. It's not

much up against years of pain, is it—one could wish for so much more—just a reaching out of the hand. But when it comes to the miracle of reconciliation, a new home in a way, it turns out that even a stable is enough.

When Dawn Nauman, our Director of Child and Family Ministries, took the Christmas gifts we gathered here across the street for kids at Indian Springs Elementary School, she became aware of a mom and young daughter there who found themselves suddenly homeless that week. They got kicked out of their apartment with only the clothes on their back, ten days before Christmas. So Dawn sent out an email to some Maple Grove families, just the first few people she thought of—saying that we needed, as she put it, a “Christmas miracle.” And in three hours, six families had responded offering a big stack of gift cards to Kroger, Target and restaurants, stuffed animals, a fleece blanket, a Barbie doll, play dough, pants, socks and underwear, wrapping paper, and a brand new winter coat for the mom. More people have responded since. You know, it’s really not much, is it? Just one email to a handful of church friends. It doesn’t seem like much in the face of a family’s catastrophe. But it turns

out, when it comes to a Christmas miracle, to something like “home” for a family in need—even a stable is enough.

There are some people who come to church only once or twice a year. Maybe you know some of them. I say that not to embarrass or make light of anyone’s presence here tonight. No, I say it almost by way of warning. You may not be inclined to give God (or at least the church) more than a day or two a year, and I’m not here to argue with you. You may have come here today only to make Grandma happy or because you’ve got a thing for candles. And you know, whatever the reason or the situation, I’m just glad you’re here. Welcome! But be careful, my friends, be careful—because when it comes to God being born in your life, the miracle of finding a home among God’s people, even just a day or two, even the stable of your time, is enough for God to change your life. Be careful!

Now from what I’ve been saying, you could draw the conclusion that we really only *need* to offer God our smallest of gesture, our second-rate gifts, our left-over time. That it’s okay to leave Mary and Joseph out in the cold, fine to offer one crockpot of soup in a whole city of hunger, good

enough to offer God just the barn in back of your busy life. But you've probably guessed that's not the lesson I intend this Christmas Eve.

In fact the lesson I intend is not about us at all, but about God. No, of course a stable is no place for a baby. But for God to be born into our world, a stable was enough. No, of course one or two letters for our soldiers is far too little, but for at least one young soldier, it was enough to keep his faith alive. And of course the slightest reaching out of a hand is a very small thing after 20 years of hard feelings, but God can do miracles with even that. And if God can do all that with just the stable of your life, just think what God could do with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. And there's no better time than Christmas Eve to make that commitment to God.

It's the greatest miracle of all. God's own Son, the image of the invisible God, the Great I Am, was born as one of us. And for his first home, even a stable was enough. So out of your abundance here tonight, what will you let God have so the hungry can be fed, so forgiveness can be offered and received, so Christ can be born in your family or someone else's? You can be—you can be—the stable where

Christ is born this year. You may not think you have much to offer, but when it comes to a home for Christ, even a stable is enough.