

I have found myself pondering why Jesus was laid in a manger. Now, I know you immediately think he was laid in a manger because he was born in a stable and that was what was handy, but he could have been laid in a basket, or he could have been laid in a bucket, or he could have been held on Mary's lap, but it says very specifically several times he was laid in a manger. And the angels say you'll find the child laid in a manger. Usually the Bible has more to it than just practically finding a place to put your kid – there might be something more there – so I was pondering that and I was thinking, what is a manger? And what a manger is is a feeding trough. It's a place where they put the hay for the animals to eat. It's where the animals go to get nourishment.

Now, let's think about hay. Could you get nourishment out of this hay? Sometimes, if it's good hay, it has some seeds on it. You might get a little bit of nourishment chewing the seeds, but if you tried to eat, if you tried to survive on hay, you'd probably not do real well. Now, you might be able to stay alive. You might be able to stay alive. But then again, you wouldn't thrive, would you? In fact, if you lived in a very, very poor country, that might be all there was, the grasslands, and you'd chew it, and it might fill up your stomach, and it might make you think that you've eaten something, but you wouldn't be satisfied. You wouldn't be healthy. You wouldn't thrive. There would still be a sense of hunger for something more.

Do you ever feel in your life that you're hungry for something more? That all the things around you are just straw? They don't really satisfy? When you've got your iPhone and your iPod, and you've got your new car that still smells like a new car, and you have your new clothes, and you have everything you've ever wanted and you still aren't satisfied. We read about these Wall Street executives who can't live with only a million dollars a year. They have to get a bonus, have another \$500,000.00, in order to survive. They have everything, but they're still hungry for more.

If you lived in a culture that told you the correct food to eat was straw and everybody ate straw, nobody would be particularly healthy, but the rich would have great big piles of straw, and the poor would have very little straw, but nobody would be healthy. Nobody would be satisfied. Nobody would be filled. No matter how much they chewed and consumed and tried, there would always be somewhere inside of them a longing for something more. Is there a longing in you for something more in your life? You do everything that you do. You are busy and active. You collect and you consumer. It's wonderful we call buying "consuming". We eat it up. We chew on it. We try to take it into ourselves. We try to satisfy ourselves by consuming things, and yet is there a part of you that isn't satisfied that's still hungry? That's still missing something?

I think sometimes we try to satisfy ourselves with hay, with straw, because that's what animals are satisfied with. This straw would be great for a cow or a donkey, but for a human being, it's not enough. Having shelter and food and comfort is fine for the animal part of us, but we're more than that. We're more than just an animal, and so we're still hungry. We still are hungry, and so God chose to come to Earth and be placed in a

manger. That within the straw of the manger, the straw of our lives that we're trying to feed ourselves, is placed Emanuel. God with us.

We heard some other names for this child that was placed in the manger. The Prince of Peace, Lord of Life, God of Gods. One of the names he gave himself. He said, "I am the bread of life. I am the bread of life. Those who eat me will know everlasting life. Those who consume me will be filled, will be satisfied." He even used in Greek, the word to chew, to consume to swallow, to take in. He is the bread of life. He is what God offers us instead of straw. If we consume him, then and only then can we be really satisfied. Then and only then will we have all the nurturants, all the nurture, everything that we need to be whole and healthy. God offers us food. God wants to feed us. And what is this food? This food is God's love.

One of the carols we didn't sing is "Love Came Down From Heaven." God loves us so much. God loves us so much, so much that for each and every one of us, for you, God took the form of a human being. And for you. And for you. If it had just been you and there had been no other human beings, God still would have been born because God loves each one of us that much. Chew on that. Chew on that for awhile. Chew on the idea that you are loved that much.

And then he taught us some other things. He said that what we are to do is to love God and love our neighbor. That it is through that kind of love that we will find meaning and purpose and satisfaction. Chew on that for awhile.

And chew on this. You know, God loves you that much, but God loves that person over there also. And you know what? God loves you that much, Dave, but God also loves the people who haven't come to church on Christmas. The ones who chose not to. The ones who didn't want to. The ones who've been hurt by the Christian religion, or the ones who are apathetic. But God loves each one of them just as much as God loves each one of us. And you know what else? Those who are Jewish or Muslim or Sikh or Hindu and therefore don't want to celebrate Christmas, you know what? God loves each one of them too. Chew on that.

God came down in the form of a little baby to show us of God's love, and some people noticed. The angels came and sang to the shepherds. Now, the angels must have been pretty loud. To have a huge chorus of angels, you'd think some other people might have heard, but they didn't. And there was a star in the sky that was a new star. Anyone could see it, but it was just some wise people in another country that knew what it meant and took the time to follow. And they came up to Herod, and Herod was told about what happened and he chose not to hear. In fact, he chose to be afraid and tried to destroy it.

We all react to the news of Christ's birth differently, and each year, each Christmas, it's a little different as well because we're at a different phase in our lives. Sometimes it is so easy to believe and be caught up in the joy and the wonder of God on Earth. Other times, we're not so sure about that. We question. We doubt. And that's normal. We're very

fortunate that in the gospels, one of Jesus' disciples happens to be named Thomas and is called Doubting Thomas because after the resurrection, he would not believe that Jesus was resurrected just because other people told him so. He had to have his own experience. It's okay if you don't believe just because other people tell you. If you believe that Christ was born and laid in a manger because I tell you, great. But you'll really believe it when you experience something. When something happens in your heart. When something happens where you no longer can question that there is a presence. That there is a love. That there's something more than the straw of our lives. Something deeper and something more satisfying.

What will you see in the manger today? Will you see straw? Will you see a pleasant myth? Will you see a child? Will you see God incarnate? Will you see the bread of life?

I invite you to ask God to touch you, to show you, to let you have an experience where it no longer will be someone else telling you, but you will know. You will know that you are loved by God and that God came to Earth to love you and to feed you. Amen.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in Thy sight, oh Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen. Please be seated.

During his 1960's presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy often closed his speeches with a story, and I know there are some of us here who may actually remember the 1960s and JFK. For those of us who do, we may remember this. He would often close with a story of Colonel Davenport. Colonel Davenport was the Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives. On May 19th, 1780, the sky in Hartford, Connecticut blackened ominously, and some of the representatives thought the end was at hand, that this was the end of the world. And so, some of them asked Colonel Davenport to adjourn the meeting because the world was ending, and he said to them, "It's one of two things. Either the world is not coming to the end and so there's no reason to adjourn the meeting, or it is coming to an end and I, at the end, want to be found doing my duty. So I'm not going to adjourn the meeting." And he ordered candles be brought in.

When the end comes. We've all heard predictions of the end time: Jeremiah, before that in the Bible, from all the way back, and they're still around. You may have read how the world is going to come to an end in 2012 because the Incan calendar only goes up to 2012 and the ancient Incans must have known when the world was going to end, even though Jesus told us even he didn't know. And of course, we all remember Y2K and you know, if the computers crash, that's going to be the end of the world. People have been talking about the end of the world for a long time.

This reading from the Gospel where Jesus talks about the end, what does he say? He says that that's good news. So someone comes up to you and says, "It's the end of the world." Your response, as a Christian, is, "Great! That's wonderful news!" Because Jesus says at that time we are to stand up tall, raise up our heads because we know that our redemption is near. The end of the world means that Christ is coming near. It's not something to be afraid of. So I suggest if someone tells you the world is about to end, you say, "Fine. I want to be doing my duty."

There's a Buddhist story about an old monk who was well into his 90s. He was outside his hut planting an apple tree. It was just a tiny little apple tree and someone walking by said, "Why are you doing that? After all, you're not going to live long enough to see any apples from it." And he looked at him, and he said, "If I knew I was going to die tonight, what I would be doing today is planting that apple tree." We're doing what we're doing no matter what, even if it is going to be the end of the world.

So the next time someone predicts the end of the world, say, "Great. Now I'm gonna go about doing my duties because when the end of the world comes, I want to be found doing." I have a little refrigerator magnet that someone gave me and on it says, "The world is about to end. Christ is coming. Look busy."

So, that's what we're supposed to do if the world is truly coming to an end, but we don't know when that's going to be.

But like everything in Scripture, talking about the end times also has more subtle meanings of our spiritual journey, of our own growth. And we've all had moments in our life when it felt like our world was coming to an end. It might've been when you walked into that doctor's office, and you got the diagnosis of a dreaded disease. It might be when you got the phone call of someone you love, a spouse, a parent, a child, who is dead. It might be when someone you cared about hurt you deeply. It might be when you lost your job. It might be when you found yourself in the middle of a divorce and it feels like the world is coming to an end because the world, as you knew it, is coming to an end.

When you walk out of that doctor's office, everything is different. When the one you love has died nothing is the same. Your world has come tumbling down. The question is, "How are you going to respond to the things that happen in your life?" We all have circumstances, things that happen to us because none of us gets through life without struggles. We all have people we love die. We all have people we trusted to betray us. We all have to deal with physical illness. It's the way the world is.

The question for us is, "How do we respond to that?" Rick Warren in the video that those of us who are doing *The Purpose Driven Life* groups are going to see, says we have a choice. When things happen, we can either become bitter or we can become better. We can be bitter or better. We can take the things that happen to us and feel sorry for ourselves and blame other people or we can see it as an opportunity to grow, as a time to grow closer to Christ.

It's like at that "End of the World" time, we can say, "The world is ending," and cover our heads and moan and groan and scream, or we can stand up tall and raise up our heads and reach out our hands to God because we know that our redemption is near. When we go through these times of difficulty, we stand up and we reach out to Christ because Christ is with us, is walking with us. And they are an opportunity to deepen our faith, to deepen our compassion, to understand ourselves and the world a little better.

One of the exercises that is sometimes done in group development interactions is to make a timeline. You have your life journey, and in that life journey, you mark significant events: births, deaths, illnesses. And then you take and you make a line showing your spiritual life, how close you felt to God. And when I do that, what I find that the times that I felt closest to God were the ones where I was dealing with a crisis. Ones where illness had come upon me and the only way I was gonna deal with it was to reach out and grab God's hand because I knew I wasn't gonna get through it alone.

At the times when someone I loved died, my heart was broken, and it was broken open, and I knew my need for God. And now, going through a divorce, there's no question that I have no option but to pray and to be with God because that's the only way I'm going to get through it. When our world falls apart, when it seems like the end of everything, that's the time we realize we can't do it ourselves. That's the time when we have to

reach out to God and ask for help. That's when we know our need for God and our need to pray.

The Psalm says to trust, put my trust in God and He will teach me; to put our trust in God at the times when the whole foundation of our lives is trembling, because Christ is there. When it feels like our world is coming to an end, stand up, raise up your head and know that that is when your redemption is near. Amen.