

Manger Stories
December 31, 2017

The Coming of God by Ann Weems

*Our God is the One who comes to us
in a burning bush,
in an angel's song,
in a newborn child.*

*Our God is the One who cannot be found
locked in the church,
not even in the sanctuary.*

*Our God will be where God will be
with no constraints,
no predictability.*

*Our God lives where our God lives,
and destruction has no power
and even death cannot stop
the living.*

*Our God will be born where God will be born,
but there is no place to look for the One who comes to us.*

*When God is ready
God will come
even to a godforsaken place
like a stable in Bethlehem.*

*Watch...
for you know not when
God comes.*

*Watch, that you might be found
whenever
wherever
God comes.*

That was a poem by Ann Weems that reminds us of the mystery of God's coming not only into the world but into our lives. On this 7th day of Christmas, I thought it would be nice, rather than rush right on to New Years, to take some time to dwell on our Christmas stories. To linger at the manger for a bit and make sure we don't just leave Bethlehem in the rear-view mirror as we get on with our busy lives. So, today I invite you to hear a couple of Christmas stories that maybe you will hear differently, and also, to sing some of the carols we might not have sung, some of which are my favorites. So, join me as we sing together *Away in a Manger*.

GC: 25
Newdale 115

Jackie Hooks is a wife, mother of 4, a passionate follower of Christ, and a Christian author and speaker. She shares a lot of stories on her Facebook page and her signature by-line is, "*Jesus is big, Y'all.*" And this is her Christmas story which we heard last year but one well worth hearing again.

This is My Christmas Story.
Ordinary Mangers.
A Place for Everyone.

Mom's house on Christmas Eve is packed. Cousins. Kiddos. Aunts and Uncles. Extended families. New boyfriends or girlfriends. New babies. It has been going on for decades. We all show up with food and presents and wine and beer. We stand in the kitchen and the living room and the den and the dining room. Only the little kids get presents now. It's gotten too big for anyone to ever get every single person a gift...But no one is there for the gifts anyway.

The house gets a little too warm. Folks drink a little too much. But no one leaves. Someone opens the back door or turns on the air or takes a nap in a chair. There is a kids' table and an "older kids'" table. And my mom gives "special" gifts to people in our family...complete with presentations. There is never ample parking, and never an exotic menu...but everyone shows up. Most of us don't have much in common anymore. We may not even talk much outside of this one event. But we arrive because of an annual invitation from Peggy Martin. My mother, The Christmas Eve Saint. And she doesn't care how long it has been, where you have been, or what you have been up to...she wants you there...on Christmas Eve... in her home. The invitation is standing.

This is the place we exhale. This is the place we put years of baggage down. Nothing seems to matter on this one night except togetherness. My Uncle Randy's prayer. Aunt Karen's salad with ramen noodles. Whether Ben gets off work. If anyone has the flu...bring them anyway. You are missed if you aren't here. I'm proud of my kids. I'm proud of my husband. I'm proud of the sweet potatoes I make every year. And all the things that went wrong or right in life are gone...You are welcome here. The door is always open. This is my mom's house on Christmas Eve.

**My Mom Built a Manger.
Out of This Crazy Love.
My Mom Built a Manger for Her Entire Family.
Mangers.
We Are Meant to Build Them.
And Then Open Them. To Everyone.**

And I keep thinking about those shepherds on the very first Christmas...all stinky and worn out from tending sheep. All it took was an invitation (a great invitation) and they were on their way to a manger. And Mary...knowing the rocky road of obedience...no scorn, no shame, no closed doors in an open manger. And Joseph ...marrying a girl who was already pregnant...it had been a crazy year. But the manger. The manger was open. The manger was filled full of everyone. The manger is where God marries the common with the uncommon. The manger is where creation exhales...God Finally *With Us*. A Manger. God is with us in ordinary mangers.

And can I just be clear, y'all? It's been a hard year for all of us. Could we just admit we don't need new and improved programming or a more efficient parking lot. We don't need options for engaging curriculum or a step by step guide to raise the most godly children ever. We don't need photo ops or orchestrated somber moments. We need a good old fashioned manger. We need places where nothing else matters except love and Jesus and if you don't know Jesus yet, all this love will sure as heck help you see His face. Y'all. We don't need something overdone and over-valued...we need everything undone with the only thing Jesus values: Love and Us. Love and you and me and all those people you pass by every single day...the really great folks and the really crappy ones too...and places where they are wanted, and a hug and smile, and a "What have you been up to?" awaits them all.

**If You Can't Find One...Build One.
If You Are Not Invited...Invite Others.
No Fancy Inn has Any Room.
You Know the Story. Open the Manger.**

When God threw His son a homecoming party, He chose a manger. He chose His people at their best...humble and kind...in awe of Jesus together. A random group only God could orchestrate...And through stars and shepherds and

angels and babies and a young couple and some cattle too...God whispered, "Do this again and again..." Mangers are everywhere...waiting for us to step on in. Don't be afraid to hold the door open while you exhale.

Carol—Infant Holy, Infant Lowly
37 Grassy Creek
128 Newdale

This last story is one by Roger Wolsey who is an ordained Methodist Pastor. He is a bit of a progressive and I am often challenged by his writing and preaching. This is his attempt at modernizing the Christmas story and it both surprised and delighted my imagination and I hope it does the same for you. He wanted his readers to know this bit of back story before reading it he says, "This is my attempt at re-telling the Christmas story as it might occur today. I hope you enjoy it. some have been asking me about the names of the towns. Nazareth literally means "watchtower" so "stareville" is my play on that. Similarly, Bethlehem literally means "house of bread," hence, "breadhouse." He titled the story *Fast Hog to Breadhouse and it goes like this...*

"Every trailer park has its own rules... some let you dry your laundry out on a line, others don't; some allow pets off leash, some don't even let you have pets at all; some let you paint your siding any color you want, some want all of the rigs to look exactly alike; some let you build carports, some only let you have one car on your lot – and it can't be on blocks.

but on top of the written rules, trailer parks have unwritten ones, some don't pay any mind to the cars parked out in front of your place... or what time of night they're parked there... others... well others are like ours...

a community where when a girl's fiancé has been out of town pouring the foundation for the new private prison across the state for the past 6 months... and when that man's girl somehow starts showing a baby-bump — it's no beuno.

even though old man Harrison's grandkid has been running a meth lab just across the lane, and even though there's a constant parade of men coming and going out of that candy apple double-wide that always has the blinds closed, somehow because my girl Miri got pregnant while I was gone... and because i'm choosing to stay with her anyway.... we've become the park's pariahs.

I work hard and I hate having the feds take a chunk of my hard earned money – and I can't stand that so much of my taxes are used to build-up the empire, but when I got that letter instructing me to report to my hometown of breadhouse so they can audit me, to be honest, I was relieved.

I'd much rather have my books examined by a bunch of pencil-necked bean-counters than have the folks at the stareville trailer park glare at me and Miri with their judgmental beady eyes.

so we took the tarp off my cousin's Harley Davidson—well it's not like he can use it now that he's doing time for selling pot to try to get out of his mountain of credit card debt!— and me and Miri with a 9 month bun in the oven took turns riding that hog to breadhouse.

I rode fast. Miri rode faster.

and wouldn't you know it... when we got here, all of the members of my family had "reasons" they couldn't make room for us.... they glared at us just like the folks back at stareville

and wouldn't you know it... there was a bowl game taking place and all of the hotels and motels were filled up too! the only one who took pity on us was an old Asian madam who ran a brothel from her double-wide at a trailer park in breadhouse!

she didn't let us inside, but she's letting us crash on the screen porch on the backside where her stray dogs and cats fight for space on the ugliest sofa you've ever seen! now bear with me here... 'cuz this is all just leading up to what happened last night.

we'd just cleared off as much pet hair as we could from that ugly couch and were getting ready to hit the hay for the night... when... all of a sudden, miri's water broke, I freaked, and I did the best I could to help bring that little fella out into the world.

he's beautiful... he's gorgeous ...and he's wise! I mean... the way he looks at you ... it's like he already knows who you are... he sees right through you... he sees you ...and you feel like he loves you just as you are.

I cleaned out a plastic laundry basket I found in the corner and put a pillow in it, and Miri wrapped him up with some of my t-shirts and laid him in there.... and the dogs and cats stopped their squabbling and they didn't make a peep the rest of the night!

and then before long, these minimum waged, rent-a-cop, security guard dudes showed up!

they'd been working over at the Walmart parking lot to make sure that cars didn't drive on the newly painted lane stripes overnight and they said the strangest thing!

one of them passed out and fell off of his chair, and when he woke up, he told the others that he'd had a wild dream – the most vivid dream he'd ever had – it was scary 'cuz it seemed like he was dead, but the dream told him not to fear, and it told them they needed to come over to the breadhouse trailer park to see a newborn babe – ours!

they said he's gonna shake things up and turn this world upside down! said he's gonna be like god! said the kid's got a holy mission in life! said he's gonna bust open the prisons, end people's addictions, forgive people's debts, and hold a big party where everyone's invited!

So, they dropped their donuts and sprung off their metal folding chairs and found us!

now, I'm not sure about this "god" stuff, but that kid is definitely special, when you're with him, you're really with him, I mean he's really there... with you...

when you hold him, you feel like you're holding all the love in the world, ... so, while they were taking turns holding him, I rode over to a convenience store that's open late and came back with a bottle of wine and a handful of swisher sweets which we lit up to celebrate.

listen, I'm not sure what you make of all of this, maybe those crazy mall cops are right, maybe not, all i know is I'm as proud as a little boy's dad could ever be!

I've got some left!

let's light up these cigars and blow holy smoke to heaven!

are you with me?

Thanks be to God! Amen.

please stand if you are able and let us sing together our hymn of response Joy to the World

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Newdale: page 134