



FROM THE PULPIT

North Shore Congregational Church

“How a Manger Becomes a Throne”

Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching

Isaiah 53: 1-12

December 10, 2017

So, that one was new to me. The namesake piece of what the choir is sharing, today, is what we just sang – The Snow Lay on the Ground. While this arrangement is newer, the carol dates back to 19th century England, but I’d never heard it before. And, what it does, in many ways, is to just paint a simple, but beautiful picture of that classic Christmas scene.

It starts with the backdrop – it sets the scene that stands behind everything else.

*The snow lay on the ground,
The stars shone bright,
When Christ our Lord was born
on Christmas night.*

It breaks into the chorus, *Venite adoremus Dominum*, or ‘Come, let us worship our Lord.’ (And, we’re going to come back to that.)

But, the song continues with the sopranos and altos singing as Mary and a few animals enter the scene.

*‘Twas Mary, daughter pure of holy Anne,
That brought into this world The God mad man.
She laid Him in a stall at Bethlehem;
The ass and oxen shared the roof with them.
Venite adoremus Dominum...*

In the third verse, sing by the tenors and bases, the rest of the cast appears.

*Saint Joseph, too, was by, to tend the Child;
To guard him, and protect, his mother mild;
The angels hovered round and sung this song,
Venite adoremus Dominum.*

It is a simple and beautiful reflection of the manger scene that is given to us in this piece. There’s little more to it than that. It is the epitome of the manger scene: snow on the ground...a

clear, crisp night with stars shining...Mary and Joseph adoring the infant Jesus with animals surrounding them and angels serenading them all. It's the picture you imagine, in countless different forms, with every mention of that scene that arises around us. But, the song isn't quite done.

With the rhymes and the rhythms played out, the song suddenly breaks from what is relatively predictable pattern of lyrical poetry and changes, entirely, the choral setting as the choir begins to sing,

*And thus that manger poor became a throne;
For he whom Mary bore was God the Son.*

The music builds, the bouncing lyrical theme of the first half of the piece returns, the spirit of the music soars and the choir enters into their choral proclamation,

*Venite adoremus Dominum
Venite adoremus Dominum*

Or, in other words, 'Come, let us worship our Lord. Come, let us worship our Lord.' And on... But, it was that break, that shift in the music, and that one line that truly grabbed my heart and mind as we prepared for our celebrations this morning. "And thus that manger poor became a throne."

There is a profound simplicity to the surroundings of the birth of the Christ-child. That's the truth to which Isaiah is speaking in Isaiah 53 – a passage often referred to as 'The Suffering Servant.'

2 For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. 3 He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

There is a profound simplicity to the surroundings of the birth and life of the Christ-child. In many ways, that seems to have been the 'theme' that has grabbed my attention coming into this Christmas season as a whole – the remarkably humble context into which Jesus was born. Not to parents of great status or worth, not to buildings adorned in priestly or royal regalia, not in any way to the pomp and circumstance that would most certainly be anticipated with the birth of a king, but to a feeding trough in an animal's stall. But, that manger – that feeding trough surrounded by the hay, the spider webs, the dirt and the cow dung that was most certainly part of the setting – that feeding trough that was the epitome of humility and lowliness – that manger became a throne. And, when I read that line in our song, as I sang with the choir for the first time, "And thus that manger poor became a throne," my heart immediately began to ask. 'How?'

Ask yourself that question. Ask yourself how, when, in what manner that simple manger became the throne of God.

- Was it throne the moment God chose to use that setting?
- Did it become a throne when Mary and Joseph arrived in the stall?
- Did the manger become a throne when the Christ-child was laid in it?

- Or did it become a throne when Mary and Joseph knelt in adoration and the angels sang in glorious exaltation?

Did that manger become a throne the moment that Jesus was born into it, or did that manger become a throne when people proclaimed ‘Come, let us worship our Lord’ and then ran to kneel at the bed of their infant king?

If I can ask it different way – was Jesus king because God said so, or was Jesus king because the people of God chose to make him their Lord?

There’s a reason, I think, why the song keeps going back to that phrase. After each character, after each verse, and again and again at the end, the song repeats,

Venite adoremus Dominum

Venite adoremus Dominum

‘Come, let us worship our Lord.

Come, let us worship our Lord.’

The kingship, the lordship, the majesty of Jesus in our lives is not a default position – we have to choose whether we are going to treat his infant bed as a manger or a throne. We have to be the ones that decide whether he will be a nice story and a great guy, or he will be the Lord of lives. That is how a manger becomes a throne – not by birthright, not by heavenly proclamation, but by the decision of each and every one of God’s people to kneel in adoration at the bed of the Christ-child and turn the manger into a throne.

I think the humility of the birth of the Christ-child is striking in many ways - the meek surroundings and the ordinary family. But, as I really looked at the lyrics of this cornerstone song of our worship this morning, I was struck by the profound reminder that there is one way, and one way only, in which that meek and lowly manger becomes a throne, and that one way is when we choose to make it one!

Will you join me in prayer...

God, you came to us. In grand divinity and eternal omnipotence you humbled yourself to be with us, to be like us, to give us just a glimpse of the glory and love that is yours. But, in that humbling, God, we are reminded of the choice we face – to worship you, to serve you, to live our lives in and through you in a way in which we can faithfully say that we are living in worship of our Lord.

Give us the wisdom, God, to discern those paths of service and worship that you have place before us. Give us the courage to step into the lives of discipleship to which you have called us. Give us the faith to trust in the promises that you have made to walk with us in our journeys. And, help us, through all of this, to discover the joy, the wonder, the glory and the hope that we can know in living out our worship of the newborn King.

God, you came to us! In the humility of a manger you were born to us. So, today, we come to you. In worship, in praise, in thanksgiving – we come to you as we open ourselves to your Spirit and your work among us, that we too may worship our Lord and be among those who, this Christmas, choose to turn that manger into a throne.

Amen.