



A CAVE: GOD'S HOLY STAGE

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1 Samuel 22:1-3
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For Christmas, I thought I would take my wife and daughters to see *The Phantom of the Opera* in San Francisco, but I discovered that the show was sold out. (Actually, it's sold out for the next two years.) Then my sister telephoned me from Pasadena to say that David Gaines, who plays the leading role in the production, had visited her sixth grade class. She told me that a woman in Cupertino had 20 tickets for the show (for excellent mezzanine seats), and asked me if I was interested. I felt a rush of excitement at the possibility of being part of a select audience to see this new production. I got the tickets, and on a dark, rainy night we drove up to the city to see "The Phantom of the Opera" at the Curran Theater.

As we took our seats the packed house was buzzing with excitement and anticipation. Soon, the powerful strains of an organ filled the theater. The sound reverberated all the way to the rafters and reached down almost to the deepest parts of the soul. A chandelier rose from the stage and began swinging to and fro overhead. The music and singing were even more spectacular than I expected. I was astonished by the intricacy of the sets and the staging. A crew of 36 men is required to pull on ropes to open trapdoors and control the candelabras that come up through the stage floor from the dark pit of the Phantom's world. In that world he pours out his heart, longing for someone to love. For two and half hours we felt ourselves irresistibly drawn onto this stage.

As I took in the sights and sounds that evening, it struck me that one of our great longings in life is to be part of a story that is bigger than ourselves. This is what gives us significance and transcendence. Well, today I would like to invite you to be select guests on God's stage for the playing out of the great story of the redemption of mankind. I pray you will find yourself drawn into God's world as you hear him singing his song of longing for someone to love.

In the opening scene, God chooses the setting where he will make his grand entrance upon the earth. If you were a Jew living in the first century, where do you think that setting would be located?

I. Setting the Stage: Bethlehem

The introduction to the New Testament reads like "A Tale of Two Cities," with Rome and Jerusalem competing for the spotlight. Rome was the political center of the world of that day, the Washington D.C., the power base of the movers and shakers, the lobbyists and the money mongers. Jerusalem, on the other hand, was the religious capital of the world, the place where people went to be ordained and authorized to worship, where the religious tithed and sacrificed. The powers that be in Jerusalem hated everything that Rome stood for, yet deep down they wanted everything Rome possessed: money, the power to tax, and authority over the masses. Jerusalem even had in-

vested a lot of money trying to make herself like Rome, so much so that in the book of Revelation John refers to the city as "Sodom." Which city would God choose for his stage? The answer is, neither!

The book of Micah reveals God's surprising setting:

**But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
Too insignificant to be among the clans of Judah,
From you, for Me, one shall go forth who shall be a
ruler in Israel (5:2).**

God did not shine his spotlight on Rome or on Jerusalem, but on tiny Bethlehem, "too insignificant to be among the clans of Judah." I am reminded of the youthful David, who was too insignificant to be counted among the sons when the call went out for a king. Why Bethlehem? Because that was the place where years earlier an obscure love story was enacted. In that little town a gentile woman was drawn to the God of Abraham, and she gave birth to the line of David.

Bethlehem, then, was God's choice to stage this event. And to get all the players to his holy stage, God used the powers of Rome and Jerusalem. A tax increase was in the works to fund Rome's decadence, so a census had to be taken in order to enact the decree. (If Rush Limbaugh had been around then, he would have said, on hearing of the upcoming tax increase, "See, I told you so!") But the massive wheels of Rome's bureaucracy were turning merely to ensure that one Jewish couple traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem at the exact time so as to fulfill Micah's words. While Jerusalem was whirling in religious activity, pomp and circumstance, three gentile kings came seeking to worship the Messiah. Herod could not get the answer to his question about the Messiah's whereabouts from his vast court, yet these three kings, with but one verse of scripture, discovered that Bethlehem was where they should seek the Christ-child.

God used both the governmental and religious authorities of the earth as his cab drivers to get his holy actors onstage in Bethlehem at exactly the right time! These authorities were merely the backstage hands who pulled on the ropes, opening and shutting doors in order to give the kingdom of God its proper staging in quietness and obscurity. God seems to have a holy shyness, doesn't he? He doesn't get a crew from "60 Minutes" to film everything lest they spoil the hallowed atmosphere for his chosen guests. Earlier this year I took a group of men to Calgary for a conference, and we went to Lake Louise for dinner afterwards. The lake is framed by beautiful Alps-like mountains, with a huge glacier in the background. From the hotel in the distance we heard the strains of an Alps-horn playing "Amazing Grace." Just then the hotel itself was encircled in a rainbow. Everyone was quiet, taking in the beauty of the moment; a sense of transcendence gripped

them. But then a group of tourists appeared and began filming the scene. The cameras shattered the solitude, drowning out the piercing melody of the Alps-horn. God doesn't want tourists filming his holy moments when he puts his people on-stage. That is why he performs his wonders in quietness and obscurity.

II. Focusing the Spotlight: The Cave

When I visited Bethlehem, I was impressed by Herodium, the palace of Herod the Great which he built as a memorial to himself. Herodium was one of a chain of palace-fortresses erected to protect his kingdom. The palace, which took nine years to build, was set on a mountain which was raised and built up to a conical shape. According to Josephus, the palace was encompassed with circular towers. Two hundred polished marble steps led to the summit where rich royal apartments provided both security and beauty. At the foot of the mountain lay other palaces, buildings, pools and terraces. An aqueduct was built at vast expense to bring an abundance of water from a great distance. Now a mere stone's throw from that luxurious palace of a demon-possessed king lay not a stable or an inn, but a cave, the birthplace of Christ, the King of kings. Why a cave? We know that King David, who was born in Bethlehem, birthed his kingdom in a cave, the cave of Adullam ("refuge"), located 13 miles WSW of Bethlehem. If we can understand what went on in David's cave, then we will learn the significance of Jesus' cave.

We find this text in 1 Samuel 22:1-3:

So David departed from there and escaped to the cave of Adullam; and when his brothers and all his father's household heard of it, they went down there to him. And everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was bitter of soul, gathered to him; and he became captain over them. (1 Sam 22:1-3)

(a) The Cave: A Refuge from the World

To David, the cave of Adullam was a symbol of rejection. He had been rejected by his family, and he was in constant danger in the royal court, so he ran for fear of his life from Saul, who was a raving lunatic. Finding no resting place in the walled cities of Judah, and failing to obtain help from foreign powers in Gath, the only safe place for David was a dark, lonely cave. King Saul, who was possessed by a demon, lived in a palace, but the boy David, who was possessed by the Spirit, lived in a cave. The Spirit of God was a threat to the world forces of darkness! In the very next scene, the lunatic Saul will slaughter a whole city of priests, fearing they had sided with David.

Jesus, the new David, also was born in a cave. It was prophesied of him that he would find no home with his family, nor would he find one in the world because he was a threat to the spiritual forces around. An innocent child was a threat, so evil will make a vicious response. In the next scene, Herod slaughters all the babies under the age of two in Bethlehem. I watched on television the memorial service for Polly Klaas, hoping to hear a word from any of the several speakers that would give significance to that little girl's life. The best word came not from the politicians or the spiritual leaders, but from a child whose poem was quoted by a policeman. The center line of the poem

said,

*This is not the first time God above,
Has sacrificed innocence
To demonstrate his love.*

On the first Christmas, evil came into every home in Bethlehem. It searched out every infant son and slaughtered them before the eyes of their mothers. Today, children are fearful lest evil enter their homes, but on that day evil entered every home. The prophet Jeremiah's word was borne out,

**A voice was heard in Ramah,
Weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children;
And she refused to be comforted,
Because they were no more?**

Why was this Child born in a cave? It was because he had Spirit and thus he was a threat to all the world forces of darkness. Thus the cave served as a shelter from the world.

The cave of Adullam was also to become a holy sanctuary for David. Once he became disconnected from family and friends he connected with God himself. And in that cave he learned to pray. Listen to his words from Psalm 142:

(b) The Cave: A Holy Sanctuary

**I cry aloud with my voice to the LORD;
I make supplication with my voice to the LORD.
I pour out my complaint before Him;
Look to the right and see;
For there is no one who regards me;
No one cares for my soul.
I cried out to Thee, O LORD;
I said, 'You are my refuge,
My portion in the land of the living.
Give heed to my cry,
For I am brought very low;
Bring my soul out of prison. (Selections from Psa 142)**

David regarded the cave of Adullam as a tomb. It was there he died to all human relationships. He related only to God in prayer, and the magnificent psalms which he wrote are the result of his rejection and his being entombed there. Jesus, the new David, would mourn that "foxes have holes, the birds have their nests, but the Son of Man had no place to lay his head." He would find his heart refreshed by God, however, as he prayed the psalms of David. For the new David, the cave became a holy sanctuary. I have a friend who suffered such abuse from her first husband that her only refuge was a cave off the coast of southern California. There she spent a night in safety. Later she was to face rejection from every member of her family. The cave was the catalyst for her finding Christ, and he became her refuge thereafter.

Writing about his imprisonment, his cave, in *The Gulag Archipelago*, Aleksander Solzhenitsyn says this:

It is a good thing to think in prison...because, and this is the main thing, there are no meetings. For ten years you are free from all kinds of meetings! Is that mountain air...A free head—now is that not an advantage of life in the Archipelago? And there is one more freedom: No one can deprive you of your family and property—you

have already been deprived of them. What does not exist—not even God can take away. And this is a basic freedom. It is good to think in imprisonment. And the most insignificant cause can give you a push in the direction of extended and important thoughts...

I turn back to the years of my imprisonment and say, sometimes to the astonishment of those about me: "Bless you, prison!" Lev Tolstoi was right when he dreamed of being put in prison. At a certain moment that giant began to dry up. He actually needed prison as a drought needs a shower of rain!

All the writers who wrote about prison but who did not themselves serve time there considered it their duty to express sympathy for prisoners and to curse prison. I... have served enough time there. I nourished my soul there and say without hesitation,

"Bless you O prison, for having been my life!"

This is what the cave teaches us: It is a shelter from the world, and a sanctuary with God.

To David, the cave of Adullam was one thing more.

(c) The Cave: The Gathering Place

**Bring my soul out of prison,
So that I may give thanks to Your name;
The righteous will surround me,
For You will deal bountifully with me.** (Psalm 142)

Once David connected with God and learned to pour out his heart to him he became spiritually alive; and once he was alive the fragrance resulting began to draw others to him. First Samuel says that he "departed from there and escaped to the cave of Adullam; and when his brothers and all his father's household heard of it, they went down there to him. And everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was bitter of soul, *gathered* to him, and he became captain over them." The cave of Adullam was the gathering place. (We get the word "kibbutz" from the Hebrew word for "gather"; thus Adullam was the first kibbutz in Israel!). Everyone who "gathers" in this sense is drawn; no one is coerced. Saul was seeking David, utilizing the military, his spies, etc., but he could not find him. But those who were internally drawn found him easily. This is the mark of the Spirit.

It was the same with the new King. Men were drawn, not driven to him. Herod, who wanted to kill him, couldn't find him, yet those who sought to worship him found him. Three Gentile kings from the other side of the world were drawn by a star and one mere verse of Scripture. That was all they needed. (You don't need much to find the cave; you only have to obey what you know.) The shepherds were minding their flocks when suddenly they were surrounded by angels. Shepherds and kings (select guests at the birth), the whole world, will bow down to this shepherd King, because he found the life of God in a tomb. All who want him will find him; no one need be coerced.

So the cave is a shelter, a sanctuary, and a gathering place.

Lastly, the cave is a birthplace. Adullam is mentioned one more time in the scripture, in 1 Chronicles. In this instance the cave is actually linked with Bethlehem.

(d) The Cave: The Birthplace of Holy Love

Now three of the thirty chief men went down to the rock to David, into the cave of Adullam, while the army of the Philistines was camping in the valley of Rephaim. And David was then in the stronghold, while the garrison of the Philistines was then in Bethlehem. And David had a craving and said, "Oh that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate!" So the three broke through the camp of the Philistines, and drew water from the well of Bethlehem which was by the gate, and took it and brought it to David; nevertheless David would not drink it, but poured it out to the LORD; and he said, "Far be it from me before my God that I should do this! Shall I drink the blood of these men who went at the risk of their lives? For at the risk of their lives they brought it." Therefore he would not drink it. These things the three mighty men did. (1 Chron 11:15-19)

Not only were men drawn to David in the cave, but love was born there. These men so loved the king they risked their lives to fulfill a mere whim on the part of their leader. They translated a random sigh into holy commands. What a relationship! They risked their lives for the "cravings" of the king! Proud and excited, they brought water to David and, moved to holy fear by their love and devotion, David turned their action into an offering of God.

The worship in Jerusalem cannot rival the worship in the cave of Adullam.

It is the same with Jesus. Men and women so love Christ, whom they found in their cave, that they will gladly risk their lives if that would satisfy his most insignificant craving. This was what the Magi did. They made their dangerous journey in the middle of winter, risking their lives to bring him gifts. T.S. Elliot's poem "Journey of the Magi" puts it beautifully in these verses:

*All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.*

Isn't this what we find in the gospels? A woman sacrificed shame and embarrassment at a party, washing the feet of her Savior with her tears. As a gift to him, she poured a flask of pure nard, worth a year's wages, over his head, saying, "My master has need of this." In the book of Acts we find saints risking their lives to enjoy hospitality with their brothers and sisters in Christ. I think it was this text that gave birth to the words of Jesus in the gospel of Mark when he said, "Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because of your name as followers of Christ, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward" (Mark 9:41). Jesus was referring to that holy love that is manifested when people risk everything for one another because they love

the King and want to follow his holy orders.

What is the significance of the cave of Bethlehem? It is a tomb of refuge, a safe harbor with God, a den where men, women and children in the new community of faith may fellowship together, and it is the birthplace of holy love.

When *The Phantom of the Opera* ended, when the music and the penetrating voices were no more, the one weakness I noted was that the story line could not hold me because I was unable to make it my story. Yet the production was so powerful it is predicted that it will run for two years, with every performance sold out. This drama of the cave of Bethlehem has sold out for 2000 years. When I read this story, when I hear the haunting music of the angels and I see the magnificent backdrops and staging, I'm drawn into it because it's my story too. And I know that

for many of you, it's your story. At our pastoral staff meeting last week we began sharing about the Christmas season and almost every one of us wept. There is something about Christmas that is painful to us because of our backgrounds. We have faced rejection and loneliness, yet we have felt the devotion of connecting with God. It is my prayer that you, too, will feel the pain which will lead to devotion to God, that it will draw you to him, and that you will feel the love of the Savior for you.

I have been in Adullam, and though it was as painful as death, it was the sweetest place I have ever experienced. This Christmas I, too, can say with the Magi, "*I should be glad of another death.*"

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