

One of my favorite Christmas stories is about the manger with two babies in it. In 1994, two American Christians were invited by the Russian Department of Education to teach morals and ethics in the schools there. They also spoke in prisons and at a large orphanage. As Christmas drew near, they told the children at the orphanage the story of Joseph and Mary, their journey to Bethlehem, not finding room there and Jesus' birth in the stable. The children listened in amazement and wonder, hearing the Christmas story for the first time.

After the story, the Americans gave each child materials to make their own manger— three pieces of cardboard, some yellow tissue, a small piece of flannel for the baby blanket, and a small figure of a baby cut out of felt. The Americans wandered around watching the children assembling their mangers.

Then they came to little Misha's manger and were surprised to see not one but two babies in the manger. They called the translator over and asked him to ask Misha about it. Misha crossed his arms over his chest and began very seriously to tell them the story of Jesus' birth, and for a little boy who had just heard the story once, he was amazingly accurate in the specific details, until he came to the part where Mary put Jesus in the manger.

“When Mary put Jesus in the manger,” he said, “he looked at me and asked if I had a place to stay. And I told him I had no mamma or papa so I have no place to stay. Then Jesus said I could stay with him. But I told him I couldn't because I had no gift for him like everyone else.

“But I wanted to stay with him so much and I thought that maybe I did have something to give him. I asked him, ‘If I keep you warm, will that be a good gift?’ And he said, ‘That will be the best gift anyone ever gave me.’ So I got into the manger with him and he said I could stay with him forever.”

And then Misha began to cry. He put his hands over his face and sobbed. He had a place with Jesus and he would never be alone again.

Many find the Christmas season to be a lonely time. But Misha reminds us that Jesus is Emmanuel – God-with-us. Christmas is for that lonely child in each of us who wants a place to stay forever, never to be alone, never abandoned. May you find the joy of his love to keep you warm.