

Another Look at His Birth
(Christmas Day)

In viewing the circumstances of our Savior's birth, I want to look more deeply into the familiar events of the Gospel accounts to get a fresh view of the Incarnation. The fact that we know the particulars so well may prevent us from being as profoundly moved as we should be by this remarkable story. I especially want to ask this question: what sort of commentary on Planet Earth does the birth narrative provide? Does the way this whole event occurred tell us something about the world and about the hearts of those who live in it, including our own? Was the way and the means which God chose to enter our cosmos necessitated by what He fully expected to encounter here?

Curious, isn't it? We modern folk envision our planet as that benign source of civilization that would export its glories, if it only could, far and wide throughout the universe. We picture outer space as a raging, desolate, hostile place of little-known or understood forces, a mystery gradually being solved by the little instrument-laden research probes we've sent out that loyally and bravely relay data back to us from the Great Beyond. We search incessantly for signs of life with which we could make some sort of exchange, imagining a Marvel Comics sort of climax in which all of the universe's sentient creatures sit down to meet under the banner of a new United Planets organization. Never does it occur to us, in our pride of intellect and accomplishment, that even if there were such beings, they might want nothing to do with us, after learning even a little bit about us. We would never concede that if the word Alien should be displayed anywhere, it should be placed in very visible location on signs somewhere in the outskirts of our own solar neighborhood, facing space-ward, as an urgent warning against approaching anywhere near us!

From the circumstances of the Incarnation, we will learn some important things about ourselves and our world as we see the manner which God chose when He drew near us. And we will come to worship Him, when we realize that He did not hesitate because of what He knew would greet Him when He arrived. We will also marvel at the faith of a few of our own --yes, denizens of this planet just like you and me-- who met His arrival with open hearts that were ready to receive Him and to do their very best to be cooperative elements in His plan. We will be forced to conclude that things really haven't changed much at all since those times, in spite of the pride and sophistication of our age. The hearts of men remain phenomenally dark, and the world is the site of a great, cosmic conflict. This will be both fearful and humbling for us. But faith in Him grants us a share in the glorious triumph He achieved, and participation in the exceedingly wonderful conclusion toward which He is moving.

There are three lessons I want us to derive from our Lord's first coming. The first is that God must go to the poor, the unknown, the obscure, and the helpless, to find vessels filled with faith and a willingness to do His will. Joseph and Mary are our models here. Joseph: a foster-father pressed into service by a divine dream, armed with nothing else to ward off his fears and the inevitable questions and doubts that would have arisen among family and friends; Mary, pregnant out of wedlock, with nothing to justify herself at all except her own account, unwitnessed by any other, of an angelic visitation. With this alone she must withstand all the scorn and disfavor that the culture of her time would have heaped upon her. If we would let ourselves look at their outward circumstances unaided by blessing of hindsight we would wonder how they could have endured.

Secondly, notice how God manipulates the huge revolving gears of human government to work His own ends, but He does so subtly and invisibly. A Roman census becomes the means of a fulfillment of divine prophecy. But God makes no alliance with Rome, brushing aside the might of the Empire as a means of asserting His control over the world. Rome was only a means to an end: that earthly vehicle which He would place in the harness of His will, much like a farmer might put a great ox in a yoke in order to utilize its strength. He used Rome to ensure the fulfillment of biblical prophecy both for the Savior's birth, and for the manner of His death. He would later employ the marvelous Roman infrastructure as the means through which the Gospel would be spread. He would soon judge his disobedient covenant people by the very same agency. But Rome could never be trusted on its own terms, for it sought no glory other than its own. Ultimately, it too would receive His final judgment for its arrogance and self-exaltation.

Thirdly, observe how God must accomplish His arrival on earth with utmost discretion. Danger lurks everywhere. There are the religious authorities with their presuppositions about the person of Messiah, who would not alter their concepts one iota when the reality of the Son of God stared them in the face. There is the malice of a hated provincial ruler, Herod, who worked to ingratiate Himself to both his subjects, the Jews, and his bosses, the Romans, while being filled with fearful insecurity over the tidings of the Savior's birth. Once again, it is the overcoming faith of Jesus' parents that delivers Him from Herod's jealous anger. And where do they find shelter from the king's wrath? In Egypt, of all places, that "house of bondage" that had once held God's people in its iron grip.

This is the entire story of the life of our Lord. He arrived in obscurity and difficulty, entrusted entirely into the hands of frail, simple, ordinary, but faith-filled people, who became His ark of safety in this profoundly dark place we call Earth. It is hard to believe that God took such

a risk. It is humbling to realize that the world could be so utterly alien and hostile that He could accomplish His purposes in no other way. He must work around men, and through men, and over men, and in spite of men, in order to save them.

And what of us, and what of today? The darkness is still the same, maybe even greater, perhaps, as history draws toward its inevitable end. Scripture speaks of a time of unprecedented evil, when all of the consummate rebellion of mankind and its rejection of God will reach its peak. Those same forces which have incited men against God since time immemorial are still here and frantically active. They have just found other means of accomplishing their ends.

God must still look to faith-filled, obedient, and available people to accomplish His ends. He will still make use of any or all of man's institutions to effect His purposes, but He will do so in the same subtle, careful, invisible way He has used in the past, for God can make no partnership with the pride of man.

We can be grateful for the world's grand indifference both to us and to our message, for we desire neither its approval nor its praise. We only long for its obedience. We should welcome marginalization and rejection from its centers of focus and attention, which, if we persisted in living in them, would only tempt us to vainglory and pride. If we are humbled, even humiliated, in the process, it will only mean that the One whose Gospel we proclaim will have a greater chance Himself of being seen and acknowledged.

All of those chosen vessels through whom God has glorified Himself have shared in this sense of smallness and helplessness: Mary, and Joseph, the shepherds, Zacharias and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, the twelve apostles, and all of the saints throughout the ages. But steadfast faith in God and in His promises endowed them with a greatness that some day will be on display for all the universe to behold.

God grant that we might be among them.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.