

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Christmas Day  
December 25, 2015

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Among the many aspects of the Christmas story, certainly one is the textbook example of how Divine Providence works. The story is one we know and love. In it we see all sorts of seemingly unrelated events leading to Bethlehem. There is the census of Caesar Augustus. There is the matter of Saint Joseph's lineage. Add to that Our Lord's conception at Nazareth and the prophecy that Messiah will be born not in Nazareth but in Bethlehem, the City of David. In that city there is an overbooked inn, and a group of shepherds on night watch in the nearby fields. All these various lines of action, each free and independent, converge to serve God's purpose.

The Christmas story helps us begin to understand that the universe is like that because God is Who He is and He made it. An over-riding Will works to its end not by destroying human freedom but by *using* it. Through our human freedom (even through the blunders and sins and rebellions, as well as the obedience) the work of God moved to the Birth of Christ. Fallen humanity then as now does all it can to block the ends of God. Yet on a certain night in our history, in Bethlehem of Judaea, the Light of God overcame human darkness. A girl named Mary gave birth to a new person Who is also the oldest of all Persons. This baby looking up at His mother is co-eternal with the Ancient of Days! We would learn to say that later. But those thoughts were far away from Christmas night in Bethlehem. We look back later and see Divine Providence in the interweaving of all those various independent strands that lead to the manger behind the over-crowded inn. But in spite of the stupendous fact of what happened, this birth was a quiet one. And the world cannot be blamed for not acknowledging the birth of Christ. Almighty God chose to avoid the world's notice.

The Gospel tells us about the events leading up to the birth of the Saviour. We hear about those during the Advent season. But the Christmas Gospel does not give us *details* of Jesus' birth. Unlike Hollywood movies that leave nothing to the imagination, the Gospel allows some things to be left behind a drawn curtain. Saint Joseph probably summoned a local midwife and then stayed out of the way. The angels held the Holy Family in love, but there was no outward mark of their presence. But once Christ was born those angels could be kept quiet no longer! In

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one blaze of ecstatic joy they lit up the night sky in pandemonium and then had to calm the fears of the shepherds. (One wonders what the Birth of Christ might have meant from the outset if, instead of shepherds, Greek and Roman philosophers had witnessed the angelic outburst! But God is God and we are not, and we know it didn't happen that way.

For the purpose of redemption, God's final approach to mankind took the quiet way of simplicity and humbleness. We would have not thought this the best path for the purpose of rescuing us from our sins! We would have planned a big splash! And, after all, things didn't begin well. After the angelic outburst the shepherds paid their respect to the family and went back to their sheep! But again, God is God and we are not, *and it happened His way.*

In the stable where the baby was lying in Mary's arms and Joseph was standing close by, there was no speculation about the world consequences of this birth. Your tape recorder would have picked up no talk of world politics or changing movements of thought. That would come later. But this stable did contain the one unspoken but invincible power of the universe, *the Love of God.* Sooner or later all else will fail. But "love never faileth."

Even that is something too abstract for Christmas! The stable is where "the Word *became flesh* and dwelt among us." Here Mary looked into the face of her Son as any human mother. But through the eyes of the baby that smiled back into Mary's face Almighty God was looking out on a world of sorrow and pain and sin, a world He had come to redeem and for which in redeeming He would die. God had come, and this is the way He has come.

"And this shall be a sign unto you" said the angel to the shepherds. "You will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, and lying in a manger." It is all so elemental and common and humble. And it is the marvelous example of the providential government of our world by Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.