

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Christmas Eve
December 24, 2018

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As recorded by Saint Luke, the Birth of Christ is so familiar to us all. And it is important to realize in the account a whole assortment of seemingly *unrelated* events. There is the Lord's miraculous conception; there is the matter of Joseph's lineage; there is a reminder of the ancient prophecy Messiah would be born in the City of David; and there is the contemporary census decree of Caesar Augustus. St Luke also gives us what appear to be minor details: an overbooked inn, and shepherds working the night shift. But St Luke was writing *after* Pentecost, and it is the Holy Ghost Who puts the Gospel together. It is then St Luke, and all of us, see how these various lines of action, each free and independent, converged to serve God's purpose.

There is a name for this: *Divine Providence*. And Divine Providence happens in the universe because of Who God is and because He is the Creator. This means there is an over-riding will, a will which works to His Own end, not by destroying human freedom but by using it, even when we do not cooperate with or actually *oppose* God's grace. It was through our human freedom, even the blunders and sins and rebellions, as well as through obedience, that the work of God moved to the Birth of Christ. Ever since Adam and Eve, fallen humanity does all it can to defeat the ends of God. Yet on a certain night in Bethlehem of Judaea the Light of God overcame human darkness. In a cattle shed a girl named Mary gave birth to a New Person Who is also the *oldest of all Persons*. This newborn baby, being comforted by His mother's loving and calming voice, is also co-eternal with the One we call The Ancient of Days! We would learn to say that later. But those thoughts are far away from the night of the Saviour's birth in Bethlehem.

From the vantage point of the whole Gospel good news we can see Divine Providence in the interweaving of various independent strands which lead to this manger behind the over-crowded inn. But for all that, this miraculous birth was a *quiet* one. 2000 years ago the world could not be blamed for not heeding the Birth of the Saviour. Why? Almighty God chose to *avoid* the world's notice.

While St Luke tells us about events leading up to the birth of Jesus, the narrative does not give us details of the *actual* birth. Unlike Hollywood movies, the Holy Scriptures allow some things to be done behind a closed curtain! We can speculate.

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Joseph probably summoned a local midwife and then stayed out of the way. The ministrations of angels held the Holy Family in love, but there was no outward sign of their presence. *After* Christ was born it was different! Those angels could keep out of human sight no longer. In one blazing hymn of ecstatic joy they lit up the night sky, and the near pandemonium startled those shepherds tending their flocks. We can wonder how the Birth of Christ might have been received if the Greek and Roman intellectual world had seen that angelic display. But we know it did not happen that way.

Christmas brings God's final approach to mankind for the purpose of redemption. And it took a quiet way of simplicity and humbleness. If you and I were making up religion we might have designed a different approach for the purpose of rescuing mankind from sin. And, after all, from a Madison Avenue point of view, it really didn't begin well. For after the angels put on their night-sky show, the shepherds paid their respects to the family and then went back to business as usual! But God is God and we are not. And it happened His way. And it always does.

In the stable where the baby was lying in Mary's arms, and Joseph standing close by, there was no speculation about the worldwide consequences of this event. There was no talk of world politics or movements of intellectual thought. All that would come later. This is Christmas. Here in this stable was the One invincible power of the universe, *the Love of God*. All else will fail. But love never faileth. We would learn to say that later as well. But here is the Blessed Virgin Mary looking into the face of her Son just as any human mother. Through the face that smiles back at Mary, Almighty God is looking out on a world of sorrow and pain and sin. That newborn Baby has work to do. He has come to redeem us and for which redemption He will die. God has come, and this is the way He has come.

"And it 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." We are not told what the shepherds thought. But we are told what they *did*. They said, "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us." And they went *with haste*. Centuries before, when they discovered the Syrians had fled from the siege of Samaria some lepers said

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“This day is a day of good news; if we are silent and wait until the morning light, punishment will overtake us; now therefore come, let us go and tell the king’s household.” (2 *Kings* 7:9) Fast forward to a man named Matthew seated in his customs office. When Jesus of Nazareth looked at him and said “follow Me” there was nothing for it but to put down his pen, kick over his stool and follow the Lord. *Let us also go*. For Christmas, and how it happened, sets in motion the revelation of Almighty God in His providential care and loving government of our world by Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.