

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Christmas Eve
December 24, 2020

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We do not usually think Almighty God hiding from us is a Divine attribute. But our Holy Scriptures, and the experience of untold numbers of souls, supports that very fact. Moses encountered God in the burning bush, and Elijah in a still small voice. In a memorable triptych of the Annunciation by Robert Campin, Gabriel and the Blessed Virgin have their conversation in the central panel. But off to the right side Joseph is making *mousetraps*! It is a sign the Birth of Jesus would be “the devil’s mousetrap.” Today we would say the Birth of the Saviour happened “under the radar.”

The birth of Jesus, after an admittedly miraculous conception, was just like any other human birth since the dawn of human history. A parish priest sometimes has the happy occasion to visit a radiant young mother in the maternity ward. She holds up her pink and bundled baby to show through the glass window of the nursery, and gazing in adoration invites my adoration too. The moment recalls the joy expressed by our first mother Eve, in a cold and drafty cave fenced off from wild beasts.

God hides in ordinary events like the birth of a child. We speak of salvation history as an exchange of revelation and response. But it could be understood as an enormous game of hide and seek, played with large and great consequences. Why does God hide from us? It is so that, when we find Him, the discovery may be a life-changing moment, and carry all the romance of finding a Person. That is more exciting than accepting the dull thud of obedience to some overwhelming theological fact.

And why do we hide from God? We’ve been doing that since Adam and Eve made fig leaves in the Garden of Eden. In point of fact, Almighty God created us with the ability to hide. Human history is chock full of frightened souls, sometimes lashing out in terror, and yet pining for the goodness which has its only source in Divine love.

It all reminds me of those games of hide and seek we played as children with our parents. You tried your best, but your hiding spot was obvious, and you gave it away with your squirming and giggles. But your father pretended he could not find

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you, to your great delight. Then it was *his* turn. He had a wonderful place to hide, and you could not find it on your own. Your mother would drop broad hints about the best places to look. And she would encourage you by saying, “*you’re getting warmer.*” It was much fun: this combination of your excitement, your father’s planning and skill, and your mother’s help in revealing the secret hiding place.

One special night in our history was like that. It happened when all was quiet and in the deep stillness of a winter night. Almighty God hid Himself in a little country village, in a shed, and slept in a cattle-feeding trough. And He hid in the flesh of men. How is *that* for excitement!

As He had done in the past, the Lord God gave some momentary clues. There was a slight movement in the stars. A brief sound of something like flapping wings startled shepherds on the night shift. But there was no ticker tape parade! All through history a few men and women are ready at the slightest encouragement, to take up the clues and begin to hunt for the hidden God. The Christmas gospels give us examples: the keen ears of shepherd folk and the sharp eyes of stargazers in the East. In the dead of night, and under open windows, those shepherds asked: “Tell us where is the newborn Babe?” The wise men put the same question to King Herod. And so it is like the old game of hide and seek. *Am I getting warmer?*

The journey seemed to make no sense, and the shepherds must have thought they had taken a wrong turn. They didn’t have *MapQuest*! So they arrived at a small inn on a back street in the tiny village. The sleepy and annoyed innkeeper said, “Not here; they are out back.” The shepherds saw a drafty cattle shed. And isn’t it fascinating if we are reminded of the cave where Eve gave birth to her son? The shepherds were less poetic. “No good looking in there.” Yet they went, opened the door, and saw a girl standing there with a finger pressed to her lips, and whispering, “Come in quietly; He’s sleeping.”

How simple and joyous and ordinary is the occasion of the live birth of a healthy baby. But *once*, on a particular night, those shepherds made a discovery: *Almighty God hides so that He may be found.* Somehow, and some way, the God Who does

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not dwell in temples made with hands, the God Who neither slumbers nor sleeps, keeping watch over Israel, was in that cattle shed, *asleep*.