

CHRISTMAS EVE COMMENTARY

Bethlehem was a busy town. It was census time. Joseph and Mary were not the only ones to walk that road into the city. Obviously, they weren't the only ones to look for a room in the inn.

Yet what do we see in our lessons today? Mary labors alone, with only her husband to comfort her, to deliver our Jesus in a stable. This isn't Covenant Harrison. There aren't nice wood floors and cute art and soothing melodies. This is a cattle shed. In the cold of the night, Mary breathes and pushes, and with little fanfare the Savior arrives on the scene.

In a feeding trough the Bread of Life, through whom life was breathed into Adam, breathes His first. The angels sing. Mary ponders. Joseph stands guard. The beasts look on. And some bumpkin shepherds, at least, no doubt, in the eyes of the cosmopolitans of the day, are the only ones to greet Him. The town was full, but the stable was empty of all but these simple few: lower or middle class parents, a few herdsmen, and some livestock.

In the city of David, the Son of David was born, the Messiah, Christ the Lord, who through faith rules now in the hearts of His own and in heaven will rule His people in incomparable blessedness for all eternity. In the city that gave Israel its greatest Old Testament King, the King of kings now squirms in His mother's arms, helpless as an infant to save those helpless in sin, now listens to the baying of beasts to redeem those who like beasts have surrendered to their baser instincts instead of submitting to God's will.

Bethlehem was a busy town. Many, no doubt, passed by. But did they take note? We know the sad answer. The world knew Him not. When they saw Him, if they saw Him, they did not see Him for who He truly was, Immanuel, God with us, Christ the Lord, the Son of God, the Holy One, the Most High. He didn't look it, but that is His way. He doesn't look it in the waters of Baptism or the bread and wine of the Supper. He must open our eyes first for us to see. He must be the Light in the darkness for our enlightenment, as we will hear tomorrow.

Did they take note? We know the sad answer: not many. But some did. Mary saw Him, and she continued to see Him all the way through to His cross, where a sword pierced her own soul too, and to His resurrection. And in her we have our example. It is not enough to be with Him for Christmas alone. We must walk with this Child to His death and our death, to His resurrection and our resurrection.

I don't know if you noticed on your way in, but the baby Jesus statuette is missing from the manger scene in the courtyard. I can't find it. Someone, I am afraid to say, most likely had off with it. I've joked with some, when I've asked if they've seen it somewhere, that it is bad news when a pastor hasn't found Jesus. But the honest answer is, I simply don't know where He is, at least when it comes to the manger scene outside.

The good news, however, is that I certainly do know where the real Jesus is. And He is not hard to find. No, He comes to us, even when we, dead in trespasses and sins, cannot come to Him. He is here, God with us, in His Word of His birth today, as the fulfillment of so many of God's promises, and as the One who in His subsequent ministry and imminent return will fulfill so many more.

You might have noticed the painting on the back of your worship folders, *The Infant Christ Asleep on the Cross*, by Bartolome Esteban Murillo. It's a disturbing picture, if you honestly consider it. There is the beautiful baby Jesus, who so many are happy to gaze upon, resting on a cross, which is a stumbling block for so many. His arm rests on a skull, as He will conquer death, the new Adam to undo the sin of the old Adam. It's a disturbing picture, but that is the Jesus before us in Bethlehem, His little head to be crowned with thorns, the curse of our sin, and His little hands to be outstretched on a tree, the punishment of our sin, and His little side to pour forth holy blood in death, the payment of our sin. See Him for who He is.

Christmas is a big day, but it is the first day of a long journey for our Lord, and we do well to follow Him on it, to walk with Him through the Church Year, to make all He does for us our own and to give to Him all that has caused the wall of separation between God and man that He has come to break—all our sin—so that He can take it away in death and in return grant us His righteousness in resurrected life.

It's a busy time of year. It's a busy town tonight, people visiting family and travelling about. Don't be like so many in Bethlehem. Don't pass by without taking note. Make room for the infant Lord in the inn of your heart, and don't plan on Him staying for a day, but for life. Amen.