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WHY BETHLEHEM?

Emmanuel—God with us. What does it mean? Hasn't God always been with human beings since the creation of Adam and Eve? Favored as our first parents were by a God who conversed with them in the Garden of Eden, we their descendants are even more blessed. We know through revelation that God has chosen to dwell among us in our actual humanity. From that first chapter in Paradise, all history *moved toward* the moment when Jesus took upon Himself our physical nature in the womb of His mother Mary. All history since then *moves from* that blessed instant when the Eternal subjected Himself to time.

"You have brought abundant joy and great rejoicing....For a child is born to us, a son is given us" (Is 9: 2,5). God's self-communication is accomplished for us in an infant. The everlasting Father pours out the whole divine being to the Word, Second Person of the Trinity. And now by the power of the Holy Spirit, a Jewish maiden gives of her substance to bring forth a baby, that same Second Person of the Trinity. She is Theotokos, the God-bearer, as the Council of Ephesus proclaimed in the fifth century.

The wonder that no human mind or angelic intelligence could have devised takes place in a cave. The author of salvation lies in a manger. Bethlehem's dark night is lit up as an angel speaks not to priests or scholars but to shepherds keeping watch over their flocks. "The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them" (Lk 2:9). The weight of this glory arouses their fear until the heavenly messenger assures them, "I come to proclaim good news to you: tidings of great joy to be shared by the whole people" (10). These are glad tidings meant for us, words that call out to us to lift our hearts in unending praise.

That God would come to redeem us is marvel enough, but that God would embrace our lowliness in so unique a way is beyond what even the prophets of the Old Testament could have foreseen. We know the details of that first Nativity night and relish each separate component as the evangelists present them. The refusal at the inn, an empty cave, the nocturnal workers guarding their flocks, a single angel and then a multitude from on high. We sing carols of jubilation, hymns whose simple lines are filled with profound theology. We make small cribs. We put a star on top of our Christmas trees. We look for the signs of angelic presences in our own lives, for this Baby Who is God comes to make us alert to everything that can remind us how much He is one with us.

Now for the first time God looks upon the world with human eyes and breathes in the cold air of Bethlehem. One Who is all-knowing and almighty has human consciousness and human emotion. This is a God Who will weep, feel anguish and fear, delight in His parents' loving care, reach out to human companions and exchange a smile.

"God so loved the world that He gave His only Son" (Jn 3:16). Why take so difficult a route to prove love? A glorious manifestation of power and splendor

would have overwhelmed us and conquered all resistance. Why Bethlehem? Theologians and saints ponder the mystery of the Divine Word speaking to us in an earthly voice with an accent that shows his upbringing in Nazareth. They point out what Scripture declares: in Jesus we have God's self-communication in human form. The early Fathers of the Church tell us that God became human that we might live the life of God. This process of divinisation to which we are called is not a kind of pantheism. We are still rooted in our limitedness and weaknesses. Yet grace works in us, transforming us to become more and more the image of God in Christ Jesus.

The Second Letter of Peter speaks of the "great and precious promise...that you might become sharers of the divine nature" (1:4). The Babe of Bethlehem reaches out His arms to us, inviting our embrace. One with Him in a love surpassing all other longings, our entire being is transfigured to image His.

This earth could never be the same after that radiant night when shepherds came in haste to find the newborn Infant announced by a heavenly host. "All who heard were astonished at the report given them by the shepherds" (Lk 2:18). Did those shepherds and those who heard them ever cease being astonished? Do we? The more we ponder the reality of the Incarnation, the more we are astonished at what has come to pass.

Like Mary, we treasure all these things and reflect on them in our hearts. (cf Lk 2:19) No one ever becomes bored by such reflection. This pondering takes us deeper and deeper into depths beyond understanding as we ask our Brother Jesus to make our lives a reflection of His. Bl. Elizabeth of the Trinity, a Carmelite nun in Dijon, France, prayed to the Holy Spirit, " Come upon me and create in my soul a kind of incarnation of the Word that I may be another humanity in which He can renew His whole mystery." Strengthened by the Spirit of Love, we are called to be other Christs. On Christmas day, we ask that the power of Bethlehem bless our own small world and reach out beyond it to every other human being. The Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, writes in his poem *Inversnaid*. " Christ plays in ten thousand places/Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not His...."

"All things are yours...the world, or life, or death, or the present, or the future: all these are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's" (1 Cor 3:21-23). Son of God, Son of Mary, we hold You to our hearts.

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