

CHRISTMAS EVE • MIDNIGHT MASS 2014
SERMON - SAINT JOSEPH PARISH
FATHER JOHN ALTBERG
ISAIAH 9, 2-7 TITUS 2.11 LUKE 2, 1

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HE CAME DOWN TO EARTH FROM HEAVEN...

HIS SHELTER A STABLE...

HIS CRADLE A STALL...

The hymn we have just sung recounts precisely what happened once in royal David's city, Bethlehem. We have directly before us before us a magnificent physical re-creation of that night. The children of the parish helped us better understand what occurred that night as they finalized construction of this year's Crèche during the earlier CHILDREN'S MASS.

Bethlehem, today a modest city of about 30,000 inhabitants, is 5 miles south of Jerusalem. Marking what is believed to be the site of the manger in Bethlehem is the Church of the Holy Nativity on Manger Square. The meaning of Bethlehem translated from both Hebrew and Greek is literally, *House of Bread*...indeed, 'food' for (later) thought in the Church Year.

About Jesus being born in "The City of David"...St Matthew and St Luke teach us that Jesus, through his mother's marriage to Joseph, is in the lineage of David. Interesting to note is some earlier scholarship cast doubt upon the historical existence of David; it was not until 1993 that archeological evidence was discovered in Israel to end speculation.

David, the quiet, peaceful, boy shepherd, author of about half of the Psalms, became King of Judah. He lived and reigned about 1000 years before the birth of Jesus...three thousand years before our time.

David set the tone as a shepherd king; Angels called on shepherds tending sheep near Bethlehem to tell everyone about the birth of Jesus. The shepherds did just that. Jesus described himself as the great shepherd of sheep,

Midnight Mass, as tonight is almost universally identified is, if less well known, THE SHEPHERDS' MASS...because shepherds near Bethlehem, startled by the bright light in the darkness, were drawn to the manger by the Angels and there appointed instant agents to go tell others...

Tonight's Epistle contains a word I always find curious...it identifies followers of Jesus as "**a peculiar people**" committed to doing the right thing. Peculiar...? Indeed some have gone to recent extremes to single Christians out as such! Don't despair...it's true...for the original Greek word *periousian* means literally belonging to the flock...we are the people to whom the shepherds delivered the message...the Good News of the arrival of the Savior!

The shepherds announce that Light comes now into the world with the birth of Jesus...that Light profoundly improves our life if we do not shut it out.

The OT Prophecy of Isaiah tells us...*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great Light; those who walked deep darkness, on them Light has shined.* The Last Gospel, with which the Mass concludes, emphasizes the coming of light into darkness and tells of Jesus, the true *Light*...through him we might now recognize God.

Small wonder the matter of light overcoming darkness fits together so logically and the whole matter of Christmas and Jesus as the ultimate light begins to make such practical sense! God has a way of dropping into our reality in such a manner.

What do WE do about **The Light**? The choices are only two...we can recognize who the Light is...let Jesus visibly influence and illuminate what we do or pull down shade and refuse to be seen in the light of what God provided for us...a simple, easy to recognize presence of himself as a human being. Saint Athanasius put it most succinctly...God became like us so that we might become like him.

Follow the instructions of the Angels to the shepherds, don't be afraid of this, your savior is born...Jesus Christ the Lord who will lead you out of darkness. Belonging to this "*peculiar*" group is entirely what is expected...a welcome and defining status by which to be known!

And our eyes now at last see Him and we on this night receive Him in this Holy Sacrament of the altar...

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