

ASC Sermon Christmas 2013 G. G. West

Once again we have come to another Christmas morning. If you are a follower of the “Revised Common Lectionary,” the scripture reading for this morning should be from the first chapter of the Gospel of John instead of the Nativity narrative from Luke’s gospel which was assigned for last night and then even with that we had a choice of a shortened version which would have ended with the shepherds heading off to Bethlehem to see what the angels had proclaimed.

It is from this added portion that I wish to talk about this morning where “Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” The story was primarily about the shepherds who had come to see what had happened. Before they went on their way back to the fields to their normal lives we have this verse about Mary.

In general the second chapter of Luke is a very busy one with a flurry of noise, music and motion. Like our preparation for Christmas, the chapter describes a world on the move. With a demand from Caesar, the known world was set into motion: in order to determine Rome’s revenues for the year, Caesar ordered everyone to go back to their hometowns to register themselves as citizens of the Empire.

This decree probably inconvenienced almost everyone in the empire perhaps with the exception of Caesar himself. All in various government agencies had to deal with a colossal task of bureaucratic details. There had to be registration centers set up even in such small places as Bethlehem.

And in Bethlehem because of the decree and the influx of people, housing was not easy to find. It

seems that “No Vacancy” signs were everywhere and the only serene scene would have been among the shepherds until the angel of the Lord awakened them and sent them on to the stable in Bethlehem. I would imagine that the noise and light of the angels would be very scary but they could do nothing but obey and off they went to validate what they had been told. Is it not strange that the angels first appear to shepherds who were among the poorest of people in the world with such an important announcement? And they also were the first to see the Child Jesus?

It is interesting that Joseph during all of this has had very little to say and here Mary says nothing. We perceive Mary as being very calm and in art she appears to be in a state of great joy. She is at peace and we are to get the impression that she

knows exactly what is going on and she even has a look of confidence and wisdom.

But perhaps this picture of Mary is not correct. It is possible that the picture of Mary in Luke is of a young girl who is in a state of reflective confusion.

Yes, a lot has happened to her in the previous nine months: Gabriel greets her like a queen; he all but bowed down to announce the arrival of something of the greatest importance; and then nothing significant happens with the exception of the visit to Elizabeth and the fact that Joseph thought he would not go through with the marriage until he was reassured by an angel. She had to face morning sickness, other aches and pains, and clothes that would not fit. And then about the time she was due to deliver, Caesar makes his decree so she had to hit the road and go to

Bethlehem. I know that we see in pictures that Mary rides a donkey to Bethlehem but there is no mention of that in the Bible—perhaps to make her life even more miserable she had to walk because Joseph and Mary were poor and perhaps could not afford a donkey.

If this was to be such a special event why would there not be a proper bed for her? Why would she go into labor in a stable? This was their hometown and yet they were still turned away from suitable housing.

You should think when an angel plants a child into your womb because you are more highly favored in God's sight than anyone else, you might expect better treatment but all seems to be just the opposite.

By the time the smelly shepherds show up stinking of cheap wine and whatever they may have smoked and talk of the announcement of the angels and a Savior, Mary might be more confused and concerned about what had happened. In the totality of things, it probably made no sense to her and at the time it just did not add up.

None of this seemed to be blessed or graced. If the child is to be called as Gabriel predicted, “the Son of the Most High God,” then what is he doing in a stable? Why must the Son of God's little head need to rest up against wood which still had the residue of cow saliva?

Christmas really is not an easy story to understand. In our hectic Advent celebrations,

perhaps the world is just keeping us busy to avoid the harsh realities of life.

If there are some of us who have had bad memories attached to Christmas, we must have comfort in knowing that Mary certainly had them. So the young mother who pondered upon the events of that long ago evening and treasured them in her heart would not find pain and sadness at variance with “the holiday spirit.” Mary would recall Christmas as a time which contained some petty hurtful memories.

We too should keep in mind at the end of our season of parties and merry-making to do some similar reflecting and maybe come to similar conclusions.

Our world is not a happy world because we still have wars, poverty, and racism. What does the birth of the Christ Child of Mary mean in a world where sadness seems to prevail and refuses to take a holiday? Mary did some hard thinking on such questions the very night the world had its very first Christmas.

We do not know what conclusions she drew. A few decades later, when she wept over her baby boy as he hung on a Roman cross, she most certainly would still be confused and pondering. Her son did not have an easy journey at the beginning of his life and certainly not at the end and often in between.

So the saying of “Merry Christmas” must never be a way to pretend that in life there are no real hurts. The only thing which makes Christmas merry is

knowing the presence of our Lord in the midst of the ills of our world. And when on Easter he rises from the dead, we know that He is able to heal in our lives those wounds which He knew so well.

Think about it, ponder it, mull it over, make sense of it as best you can. And when you have done it, join the shepherds in amazing all the people with what you have seen and heard.

Amen.