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A Christmas Homily

Father David Abernethy, C.O., Mass at Dawn, December 25, 2021

The 19th Century French novelist Gustave Flaubert once said “God is in the details.” And nowhere is the truth of this statement more apparent than in our gospel for Christmas Day. It is in the details that we begin to see who Jesus is, what he will be for the world, and what our response to his coming should be.

It is a wonderful thing, for example, that the story should tell that the first announcement of God came to some shepherds. Now shepherds were despised by the “religious” people of the day. They were quite unable to keep the details of the ceremonial law; they could not observe all the meticulous hand washings and rules and regulations. Their flocks made far too constant demands on them; and so the religious looked down on them. It was to simple, humble men of the fields that God’s message first came and it would be to the simple and humble that Jesus would first offer his message of mercy.

But more importantly these were in all likelihood very special shepherds. For you see, in the Temple, morning and evening, an unblemished lamb was offered as a sacrifice to God. To see that the supply of perfect offerings was always available, the Temple authorities had their own private sheep flocks; and these flocks were pastured near Bethlehem. It is most likely that these shepherds were in charge of the flocks from which the Temple offerings were chosen. How fitting it is that the shepherds who looked after the Temple lambs were the first to see the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

We also know that when a boy was born in Palestine, the local musicians congregated at the house to greet him with simple music. The joy of the music reflected the joy in his parents’ hearts. The birth of this child, however, brings joy not only to his parents but to all creation. Both heaven and earth, we are told, sing his praise: The choir of angels announce the glory he will bring to God and the peace he will bring to men and the shepherds in response sing praise to God in thanksgiving for the Good News.

Furthermore, it is not irrelevant that the birth of Jesus was associated with the town whose name is “the house of bread,” that is, Bethlehem. This one was destined to feed his people upon what they hungered for the most – love. And being Love itself, he would one day tell them, and all of us, “I am the bread of life.” “Whoever eats my body and drinks my blood will have life eternal.” And to manifest this truth all the more clearly this child was laid in a manger – a feeding trough for the animals in the stable.

And finally, we not only see our God in the details, but also the response he seeks from us. When Mary heard all that the shepherds said, “she kept all of these things, pondering them in her heart.” After giving birth, Mary did not cease to be the bearer of the Word, but in love and faith continued to carry him in her heart. In her we see what we must become – a people pregnant with the love of God, delivering and bearing our Savior to the world.

