

Conditions at the Lord's Birth
a sermon by Rev. Michael D. Gladish

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“Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; the crooked places shall be made straight, and the rough places smooth; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken” (Isaiah 40:3-5).

Probably most of us are familiar with the idea that the time of the Lord's birth into the world was a low point in the history of the human race, perhaps the lowest *possible* point before the Lord *had to come* in order to prevent a complete breakdown of the essential connection between heaven and earth. And it is certainly true that many of the customs of that time were not only barbaric, but spiritually bankrupt and morally perverse.

In fact, books have been written – and not just within the church – showing that much of what we take for granted today as civilized thought and behavior was unknown at the time of the Advent and would not be known even today if it hadn't been for the Lord's life and teaching.

Still, every individual has to learn these things for himself, and the way we learn, and the spiritual poverty out of which we all come is the same as it was at the time of the Lord's physical birth.

What did Isaiah say? –

“Behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people; but the Lord will arise over you, and His glory will be seen upon you” (Isaiah 60:2).

When we speak of darkness we mean a situation where we can't see. So spiritual darkness prevents spiritual sight, which is understanding. Perhaps you know what that is like: someone dear to you is called by the Lord to the spiritual world, or worse yet, stricken with a terrible disease, and you are left lost and confused and without understanding of why this thing should be. You have a particular habit or obsession that you despise as much as anyone could but you find it impossible to break: it's like a bad dream that keeps recurring in the dark shadows of your life. Or – and this is a familiar story among those who discover the New Church as adults – you believe in God but when you go to church or read books on theology you can't make any sense of it and so you are in spiritual darkness about the Lord. It's a lonely and sometimes frightening place to be: you know that strength comes through understanding but you really don't know where to turn for light.

In the words of our text from Isaiah this situation is represented by a wilderness, a desert through which a way must be prepared for the Lord.

So it is in states of such despair, if at least you can remember, or turn again to the Word for help, you may hear the cries of Isaiah: yes, there will be darkness, even “deep darkness,” but “the Lord WILL arise over you, and His glory WILL be seen upon you.” Again, as Malachi said, “Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple, even the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming, says the Lord of hosts” (Mal. 3:1).

This messenger preparing the way for the Lord in the Gospels is of course John the Baptist. But it is interesting to note that the word, "messenger," in Greek is "angel," and that it represents *any message of truth* that may appear to the spirit of anybody who is able to be taught.

In fact, the story of the Lord's historical birth is full of appearances of angels – actually 7 different occasions in all, sometimes with one, sometimes with a whole multitude of them appearing at once. But the angels don't appear to just anybody; they don't appear to King Herod, for example, or to the scribes or the Pharisees of Jerusalem. The first one appeared to Zacharias, an old priest serving in the temple, offering incense in the holy place. The second appeared to Mary in Galilee. The third appeared to humble shepherds in the fields of Judaea. So the question is, what do these characters represent in our own lives?

Herod of course is the personification of self-love and self-interest. History shows that he was so cruel and jealous that he murdered anyone, including women, children and his own brothers, in his insane lust to consolidate his personal power. He was so self-centered and so universally hated that he ordered the nobles of his court to be murdered when he died so that at least there would be mourning in the kingdom at his death. As for the scribes and Pharisees, again history reveals their cruelty and hypocrisy in the interest of personal reputation, honor and gain.

Zacharias, by contrast, was a humble servant of God. As a priest serving in the temple he represents the things of the Word and religion in our lives, a remnant of old feelings and traditions that linger on and serve their uses to maintain at least a formal connection to the spiritual sources of life even as the world of our conscious choices is dominated by self-love. Elizabeth as the wife of the old priest and a daughter of the house of Aaron represents the affection for at least these external truths of the Word taught by Aaron and applied (as Zacharias applied himself) with a good conscience. Mary, too, represents an affection but for more internal truths such as those that appeal to the understanding and the life of the spirit.

So it is that the messages of truth that come to us in our lives out of heaven, the perceptions of truth that the Lord provides in times of darkness and confusion, do not appear in active states of evil but in states of worship and affection and love, most notably in states of longing for the truths which then "suddenly come to the temple" of our minds. And just as the people to whom angels appeared in the Gospel stories heard and obeyed the things revealed to them, so it is our own responsibility to hear and obey what we perceive in our moments of light from above.

There are good states and there are bad states when the Lord comes; all is not well. But He cannot come *at all* unless at least those parts of our character represented by the priest and the women are living and paying attention to the Word. In general these parts are the affections that, however limited and confused, still look to the Lord in prayer and hope, willing to receive.

Once the affections have been stirred and prompted to respond to the Word naturally there are other aspects of our lives that open up to a living presence of the Lord, as well. These are represented by the other characters and incidents in the nativity as told by Matthew and Luke. Chronologically it is in Matthew that we first read about Mary's betrothed husband, Joseph, and as happens two other times in the story he is visited by an angel in a dream. In this dream he receives the answers to his questions about Mary and her pregnancy, along with instructions on what he should do.

The word describes Joseph as “a just man,” meaning that he had compassion in not wishing to have his young bride publicly condemned. It is perhaps of more than passing interest that the Old Testament patriarch who ruled Egypt during the great famine also was named Joseph and also showed compassion toward his brothers. He too was the son of a Jacob. And he too was famous for his dreams. These and other circumstances lead us to conclude that the representation in spiritual life is much the same for these two men. And what is that? Surely it is something of the understanding, something of the mind that partakes of truth. Remember Joseph was also called a “son of David,” which in correspondences means the truth of the spiritual man. But it is not so much the analytical, judgmental aspect of understanding here as it is the good within and behind it. The simplest term for this is probably “thoughtfulness.” As Joseph listened to the angel and obeyed what he was told, so our minds must be disciplined by perceptions of truth so that we are indeed thoughtful of others and considerate of their needs.

When we begin to be thoughtful of others and considerate of their needs then we find the nativity of the Lord beginning to unfold exactly as it is described in Luke:

“And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. And this census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city.”

A registration or census for the purpose of taxation fairly clearly represents self-examination. There is a taking stock of what is within so that one's strengths and resources are known. At the same time there is an exposure of weaknesses and needs. Syria in the Word (in a positive sense) represents our knowledge of good and truth, and the governor of Syria represents the governing principles that organize that knowledge, so our self-examination must be done in light of principles of good and truth.

It is important that although Joseph lived in Galilee he did not stay there for the Lord's birth. He traveled with Mary to the city of David, Bethlehem, in Judaea. This represents an important spiritual change that we must experience at any time the Lord is to be born in our lives. Galilee, as a land of mixed races and religions, pictures an openness to new ideas, but it is also a rather external, natural state. Truly the Lord will be present and very active on the plane of natural life in His Divine Humanity, but that comes later – in the ministry of His adult years and when we are more mature in our spiritual life. At first His presence must be established in the idealism of the more lofty states represented by Judaea and especially Bethlehem, the “house of bread.” This “city of David,” seemingly the least of all the cities of Judah, actually signifies the humble acknowledgment that all genuine good and truth come only from the Lord in His Word. It is where we begin our spiritual life and where we return year after year to restore and renew that connection.

Notice that this initial journey of Mary to Bethlehem must have been anything but comfortable. She was “expecting” any day and it was a good 100 miles on foot or by mule from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Self-examination is never easy or comfortable but it is particularly draining when we are at the threshold of a major transition in our lives. We do what we can (as if of ourselves) to fulfill our destiny, but it's exhausting, and in the end we arrive, tired and humble, at the realization that nothing we do of or from ourselves alone offers us any real rest or makes us worthy of any special treatment. There is no room in the inn.

So our approach to the Lord's birth is as that of Mary and Joseph: we come up from worldly, natural states, out of a doctrine of pragmatism or "anything goes" into the doctrine of truth from good. This is our heritage from the Lord but we cannot receive it until we are prepared by Him through humble co-operation despite the hardship and inconvenience.

The rest of the story of the Lord's birth is filled with celebration, joy and concern about the good news which will be highlighted in the events of the next few weeks. New life, new love from the Lord is very small and weak at first, wrapped in the swaddling cloths of simple truths from the Word and laid among the animals of natural loves. But as it is nurtured and protected and enjoyed it will grow to fulfill every prophecy of hope and inspiration and confidence and peace ever uttered or conceived for the human race. For truly Isaiah spoke of spiritual states and of eternal life for each and every one of us especially when he said,

"Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; the crooked places shall be made straight, and the rough places smooth; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken" (Isaiah 40:3-5).

Amen.

LESSONS: *Isaiah* 60:1-6
Children's talk on darkness, and light when the Lord comes.

Luke 1:26-38 *Arcana Caelestia* #4180:5

A prayer for this service

O Lord, our Heavenly Father, You came into this world and You are coming to us still today, constantly working to preserve us in a way that leads us to Your blessing and peace.

Grant this day that we may worship You and learn from You and be inspired by the love and wisdom that flow without fail from the inner wellsprings of Your Word, that we may be strengthened in our commitment to You, and in the work that we must do – however uncomfortable or challenging along the way – to receive and honor You in our daily lives.

Amen.