

How Will We Get to Bethlehem? Christmas Eve A: 10:45 (2007)

It's a journey we may not be able to make every year. It's tiring. It's distracting. It may be disappointing depending on who you are with to help you get there. We may want to opt out occasionally so when we decide to go and see the gift of a baby again, we might just find something different waiting for us. The story of a baby no one much took notice of might say something new. How will we get to Bethlehem? It depends on how far away you are. It will depend what road you take.

In Matthew, the magi will be directed by great learning, by their ability to interpret the paths of planets and stars in the sky. In Luke, Mary and Joseph travel as a family in the usual business of life. The shepherds go to Bethlehem by heavenly dramatic revelation. All these roads will take the traveler to Bethlehem. Not all will follow the road of scholarship. Many will come surprised to hear the Word of God in the midst of life. Others will get to David's city by moving experiences that turn light on some spot of darkness that kept them from seeing. Whatever road we take, the story of the first Christmas gift invites us all to Bethlehem.

Then when we arrive we witness a scandal. It is the helplessness of a newborn lying in a feeding crib said to be a savior. God's way to Bethlehem is not ours. He breaks into human history by a different path that shuns the human throne of a ruler. He shuns comfort and stability. No elaborate preparations are made for his birth. No pre-staging, no red carpet. God is born on the road.

"What child is this?" Would such a gift as a baby born to bring peace on earth be more believable if there was purple underneath him? Those who came to visit were shepherds not kings. By entering human history in this way God identifies with the powerless, with the oppressed, the poor and the homeless. It is among these that God comes to do His divine work. Perhaps we may not see Him in Bethlehem unless...unless...we go among the same.

The story of the First Christmas is the story of the birth of a new kind of king. The throne he receives is that of his father David. Yet he was born during the realm of Caesar Augustus whose throne was hailed to bring peace, real peace on earth. This king born in Bethlehem changes the habits of our worship. He lets us feel the shock and disappointment of an ordinary baby. If we decide to

continue at all on the road we've chosen entry into the cave, his castle, only serves to wrinkle our nose at the smell. In his world, the babe of Bethlehem, rules the hearts of men first, and then their minds and bodies follow.

God has done a reversal. His word is heard by the humble. There is a place for shepherds in his kingdom. What a disguise he has as we marvel at such a possibility – that God could enter human flesh!

The road to Bethlehem brings a reward to those who don't mind the twists, the turns, the disappointments. It is the first gift of Christmas. It is wrapped tightly in rags and placed in a most unlikely place for one deemed a Prince, Mighty God, and Wonderful Counselor. The baby begs in his poverty for us to bend low – and see if it is He that we truly want. He is a gift – and his arms are open wide. Amen.