

Who Do You See Lying in the Manger?

December 24, 2017

The final hymn we sang this morning asks an important question that deserves an answer not based on hearsay or speculation, imagination or frustration, but an answer in kind, full of grace and truth? Who is He in yonder stall?

On this Christmas Eve morning, as we have gathered here in celebration and worship, I want to pose that question again. “Who do you see, as you gaze into revealed history, who do you see lying in the manger?

Many years ago, I wrote a poem as the focus of this Christmas service. I am not a poet by study or skill, but occasionally, I find poetry the best medium for conveying the message God gives to His people. So, this morning, as I ask you this question, “who do you see lying in the manger?,” I offer you this context as you frame your answer:

Who Do You See Lying in a Manger?

A quiet night, a silent night
Black sky like velvet spread with dots of light
The silence broken now and then by the bleating of a sheep;
A lamb perhaps, among the flock, seeking out its mother.
A lamb, perhaps, among the flock that might one day be sacrificed
To save some poor, lost sinner from their sins.

A quiet night, a silent night
An ordinary night for shepherds and for sleeping sheep
Until the message came,
Until the darkness of the earthly night gave way to the power of heavenly might
And from the glory that sent them to their knees
There came a voice, both majesty and peace,
“Fear not! For unto you is born this day, in the city of David,
A Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

And as you go your way to find this One of whom I say
This will be to you a sign, the marker that reveals
That you have reached your goal:
You will find the Babe, the One, the Savior
The subject of my story, the reason for all this glory
Wrapped tight in bonds of linen cloth,
The uncontrollable contained in the only comfort earth has to offer
Such a One as this, at such as time as this, lying in a manger.

They went, you know, from where they were
From field afar and shepherd’s fold
To Bethlehem to find the sign which they were told:
A glorious phenomenon, a cosmic interruption,

The stuff of angel's songs, a Babe lying in a manger,
Just as they were told.

A marvel in the universe,
God made flesh and come to earth,
One eternal, amazing first
This Babe lying in a manger,
Is what faithful shepherd's see.

Wise men, magi, scholars, watchers
Come from cities in the east
To find the One, not last or least,
Of whom the prophets speak:
The King, the foretold King,
The prophesied King, the anticipated King;
The One to reign and rule supreme,
Anointed, chosen, God's kingdom to redeem,
Powerful though powerless, royal without throne
But worthy of the dearest treasures
Most precious to the sons of earth to own.

A child, flesh and blood and unkept hair
A toddler, tiny hands and stubby toes
The spitting image of his . . . Father?
And yet a king, though modest his surroundings.
The King, worthy of worship and bending of knee
The King, worthy of the best of all offerings
Worthy of kings and rulers of men,
Is what wise men see, lying in the manger.

But, what do mothers see
As the squalling tiny form of firstborn sons
Is laid upon their virgin breasts
Just moments from their entrance,
Grueling even at its best?
What does Mary see lying in a manger?

A promise, unsought by one young girl
A son, of hers but not of spouse to be,
Not of Joseph but of God.
What does Mary see?
A boy, small and frail;
A promise made and kept;
A hope yet unfulfilled but certain by his birth.
A world alive but not yet opened
A future come but still behind a curtain
A joy overcoming grief, for now, but not for long,

Then grief then joy to come.

But for now, what does Mary see?
A smile, a newborn sigh, the first trauma past,
A life begun, for both of them, for all of them.
A promise, wide as the world and all the heavens
Wrapped in swaddling clothes,
Hers, but not,
Is what Mary sees lying in the manger.

Shepherds, wise men, mother, Mary, come and see
Yet, there's one more who looks upon the Child and sees,
Sees something more than just another Jewish boy lying in a manger.
God above, on heaven's throne, looks down upon the earth he loves,
The Child's Father true, and sees His Son lying in a manger.

God sees Himself in all His glory lying in a manger!
In this one Babe the fullness of the Godhead dwells;
In this one Babe the infinite glory of heaven swells;
In this one Babe the happiness of the Father's heart
O'erflows in every living, breathing part;
Of this one Babe God will one day declare
To whose with whom His Son he shares,
"This my beloved Son he is, my delight and pleasure,
My joy; in Him I am well pleased."

And with what may God be most content?
With what may God in perfect righteousness
invest his pure delight and pleasure best,
Other than Himself and not end Himself in idolatry?
Who can God love with all his heart,
if not Himself and thus as sinner be condemned?
God's delight in His own glory is righteousness in perfect form.
His delight and pleasure in His Son,
is delight in Himself and Himself alone.

God cannot delight in lesser things
And retain Himself as heaven's king,
So God hates sin and sent His Son,
Himself, the object of His truest love,
Into the world, to live, to die
So that justice served and divine integrity upheld
Through faith in Him, God might delight in us as well.

Gazing in the manger down on earth
In the moments of His birth
God, with unbounded joy and passion for His glory

Sees Himself lying in a manger.

Now, I ask you, gathered here,
Attentive eye and listening ear
What do you see in the manger there?
Who is he in yonder stall . . . to you?
Shepherds revel in wonder at the sight,
Wise men worship, Mary ponders,
God, ineffable and pure, takes His greatest pleasure
But . . . what . . . of . . . you?

Do you see, at the very least, what they have seen
Or has he come to be, time and distance passing,
Some lesser thing, a smaller gift of heaven
Among the brighter glow of worldly things?

Do you see the glory of the Father,
 worthy of love above all others?
Do you see the awesome wonder of the promise made his mother
 One who from the power of sin now delivers?
Do you see the King foretold, come to reign, come to hold
 Full sway upon your heart?
Do you see, with great rejoicing, a Child born, a Savior given,
 For you, to save you from your sinning,
 Him full of grace and fully of glory
 Full of God, oh tell the story
 Jesus Christ, son of man and Son of God
Lying in the manger?

Tell me now, what do you see?
All he was, is, will be?
He came, he lived, he loved, he died
He rose and now he sits beside the Father on the throne
And one day, He will return, not to a manger filled with hay
But on the clouds in bright array to claim a people all his own.
Do you see? Do you see?

On this Christmas Eve, Christmas day short just one,
Do you see what God has done?
Do you see that God has come and bound Himself in human flesh
Fully God and fully man lying in a manger?
Do you see that God's intent is for His glory,
Known by you and for your joy,
That God has come, a baby boy,
Lying in a manger.
Do you see? Oh, do you see?