

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3All went to their own towns to be registered. 4Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

*8In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" 15When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

There they were in that field when the night suddenly became the day. The glory of heaven, the glory of God himself lit the whole sky as a multitude of the heavenly host sang "Glory to God in the highest." Never had humans seen such a sight, never had they heard such a sound. Words could never begin to express what they experienced.

Then once again silence broken only by the baaing of the sheep, the rustling of the wind. Once again a darkness broken only by some glowing stars, the moon, the fires around which they were gathered.

Nothing had changed, nothing remained except the message of the angel, "I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people, for to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

They said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing which has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger.

Forget the paintings you have seen, with halos marking the holy ones. There were no halos to be seen that night. Forget the nativity scenes, brightly lit, colorfully displayed. See a cave, animals sweating, humans huddled, seeking rest after a hard journey. See a baby, wrapped as every mother of that day would wrap her own. A baby, treasured as every baby should be treasured.

Eyes that had a short time before beheld the very glory of heaven, now beheld this. Ears that had heard the angels songs, now heard the muffled sounds of drunken partiers in the background, and a baby's sounds. How disappointing it must have been for those shepherds. How very disappointing.

As disappointing as it would one day be for a crowd that had lined the streets to greet their king, Jesus. They had torn the branches from the trees to welcome him in royal procession, as he rode into the holy city, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" they cried. But now their king was dying - humiliated as he was stripped and mocked and crucified.

For eyes and ears tuned for the glory of heaven, cradle and cross will always be a disappointment. Where God is we tell ourselves, there will be miracles and visions and victories. Where God is there will be feasts on the table and health and wealth. But in Jesus the Almighty God has revealed that he is most perfectly seen as baby with no crib, a dying man abandoned by friends.

"Here I am," says the almighty, "in Jesus. Here I shall remain for all eternity."

For you God has done this that from your cradle to your grave Jesus might be your Lord. Not just at Christmas when the sky is aglow with the glory of heaven, or Easter when angels announce the crucified one is raised, but in every place and time where your life is lived. At work where decisions are made - lying in hospitals awaiting procedure or surgery - on Saturday nights as you party with friends, Jesus would be your Lord. He lived our life that he might be Lord of our life, from birth to death, and beyond.

As you believe him, receive him, you will find he is a light far brighter than all the angels of heaven. His word is more precious than all angelic song. Your Lord, your Savior, your God.