

*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.*

When I was a little boy, he told me, I remember Christmas Eve. The church was long and narrow. Everything was dark. A candle was lit. And another lit from the first. The light spread, grew. The choir sang, "Silent Night." The darkness gave way to light.

As he told me of the wonder in a little boy, I sensed the light of those candles entered his heart and remained there still.

Christmas Eve.

We are all children this night.

The family gathered.

Gifts waiting to be opened.

Children small, unscarred by life.

The story of Mary, quiet, peaceful Mary.

And Joseph, strong, standing beside her.

And Jesus gently held, wrapped in cloths, quietly sleeping in his manger bed.

No soldiers march this night. No thieves break in. No one is afraid.

Angels sing to shepherds. And we all join their song.

They journey to see this wonder God has given. They gaze into the manger and see Jesus sleeping there.

Tonight Caesar is forgotten: no sound of marching soldiers is heard this night.

No one journeys to hospital or graveyard this night.

No one is alone.

It is Christmas Eve.

God is in this world. Gentle Jesus is with us. All is at peace.

I remember how Simon and Garfunkel sang, "Silent Night", recorded along with the evening news. As the announcer spoke of the Vietnam War, of the brutal murder of nurses by a madman in Chicago, the familiar carol proclaimed all is calm, all is bright. Christmas Eve collided with the real world.

"Lord, keep that from happening tonight," I pray. "Give me one night of peace, where the bills are forgotten, and no headlines tell of the murder of a woman selling pizza. Let the soldiers declare a truce this night and family members let bygones be bygones.

Yes, we'd all like to be children this night, full of faith as candles are lit, no wrong turns yet taken, no opportunities lost.

But the evening news interrupts the silent, holy night.

And in that interruption God will reveal to you what the birth of Jesus means for you.

For he comes to you this night - not into some child's world, but into the world where aging parent's lose their memories. Jesus is born into a world where families are not at peace but children squabble. Jesus is born into a world where friends disappoint us, and everyone dies.

Unless he comes into your world just as it is, then all our celebration is in vain. For God sent his Son to be born of Mary to claim your life in this world for God's own - to claim you as God's child.

You do not belong to chaos, but to God. You do not belong to sins and disappointments, but to God. You do not belong to death, but to God.

For the Son of God, son of Mary will walk through chaos, and disappointments and death itself for you. This child of Mary will live the evening news for you. All those worse things you fear will wash over him. And the love of God will be greater still.

For when Easter morning dawns a story greater than all the evening news is told: Jesus lives forever.

That is why angels sang at Jesus' birth. A new story was beginning, your new story in Jesus. You will live forever in him, and join all the angels in singing his praises forever. Jesus Christ is your victory over every enemy and fear and loss. Jesus Christ is your victory over death itself.

Do not set your gaze back on a yesterday but look ahead to that great tomorrow begun that night in Bethlehem : God victorious over every foe in Jesus.

It will be.