

*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.*

Away in the manger no crib for bed,

the little Lord Jesus lay down his sweet head.

The stars in the bright sky look down where he lay,

the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay.

When I heard children sing this song the other night I was reminded of hay – rough, scratchy, itchy hay - not like straw that gently cushions but stiff, hay – the winter feed for sheep and cattle. Hay is what goes into a manger – a feeding trough. Hay.

Looked at from a distance a manger bed makes a sweet picture. But it is not so great to rest a cheek on hay.

Lots of things look good from a distance. Sometimes I walk at night. Especially on a cold night a home that has a light on looks so warm, so inviting. I find myself thinking, “What a wonderful home that would be to live in!” As I walk by I cannot tell if the sink is piled high with dishes, the floor dirty, the air filled with the sound of criticism or complaining. Looked at from a distance so many houses look inviting.

The same may be true as you and I look at each other from a distance. It is easy to imagine how good someone else has it, how much stuff they have, or how much success. From a distance we may not see the aging parent that is demanding so much of her time. From a distance we may not realize that he has to shoulder the expectations of a father who demands that he be the best at everything. From a distance the late hours of work and the criticisms of a boss may not be apparent. Looking from a distance it is easy to fall into envy.

Maybe God had always seen humans from a distance until that night – seen us without really knowing what it is like to be one of us. But on that night so long ago everything changed. God entered human life in Jesus.

Suddenly all the things that give us joy God knew first hand. His first meal – his hunger being satisfied by the warm milk from his mother's breast - being held – caressed – gently touched.

Falling asleep – refreshed and renewed by rest.

Smells – in that first place where Jesus opened his eyes probably not such pleasant ones but soon there would be the smell of food being cooked, or perfume and ointment, the scent of his mother.

Sounds – voices gently soothing him when he cried. Cattle mooing , sheep baaing, people passing.

A whole world that this one had taken part in creating now experienced in a new way, now experienced as a human.

But this child of Mary would also come to know all in life that is not so wonderful – like scratchy itchy hay. Maybe like most children he was somewhat shielded from the harsher things of life by his parents but once he was grown he would experience hunger, disappointment, friends failing him, enemies plotting to destroy him. He did not use his power to protect himself but lived as vulnerable as the weakest among us.

Finally he experienced the pain of crucifixion close up. I suppose that people who suffer from some injuries and some diseases experience as much physical pain as Jesus did but Jesus also suffered knowing that people whom he loved intended to hurt him in this way. Not an accident but their intention to hurt him. If it has ever happened to you that someone really has intended to hurt you, harm you, destroy you then you know how awful that feels. Jesus knows. God knows – not from a distance but inside – God knows.

And knowing God chose not to hold it against us.

God might have rained down fire and judgement on a world that would put God's own Son on the cross. But God chose to rain down forgiveness and love instead.

That is why the angels sang that night when Jesus was born. They knew that love was greater than all else in the heart of God.

That is what I have been sent to tell you this night. God's love for you is greater than all else - greater than any sin or failure, greater than any ways that you have ignored God or defied God or mocked God. God's love for you is greater. God has come so close as to truly know you and God chooses to love you forever.

Jesus is the love of God that has come close to you. Come close to him this night. Believe.