

In the stillness of the night God enters human history through the birth of his Son. He becomes our peace and our hope, the manifestation of God's goodness to us in giving us so wonderful a gift. The great national crisis of the People of God in ancient times provided a decisive model for the whole human condition. They were taken into places of darkness and loss by their oppressors, but promised light and liberty by a loving Lord who saved them out of their sorrows.

This prophetic promise was given during the period of terrible national crisis when Israel was under attack from its Assyrian enemies. God promised that the unexpected birth of a royal child would be a sign of his presence in their beleaguered state, and a pledge of his loving care for them, even in the midst of looming disaster. Like all prophetic promises, however, the words have meaning far beyond their immediate application, and become a prophetic oracle that spans the centuries to assume a universal significance fulfilled in the unexpected birth of Jesus, in the darkness of obscurity and hopelessness.

When Jesus came he was the fulfillment of these promises. He was to come as the divine hero to oversee the ultimate victory of God over the enemy of sin and death. He was born in stressful and obscure circumstances, a lowly member of a powerless people in slavery to a foreign occupation, at a specific point in history — as St. Luke's account is so precise to note. But like the child promised of old, he is in fact wonderful, a mighty Counselor and Prince of Peace, whose reign will be far greater than that of the Emperor Augustus; it will embrace all the world and bring meaning to all time: "With justice he will rule the world, he will judge the people with fairness." His birth was announced by angels, but the message is to certain poor shepherds in the fields, God's glory paradoxically appearing amidst the humblest of human circumstances.

The meaning of God's plan of salvation, the saving power of his covenants, will be realized in the incarnation of his Son, the embodiment of his redemptive love. St. Paul, writing to Titus, expresses it inimitably: "God's grace has been revealed, and it has made salvation possible for the whole human race." The Son of God, begotten eternally of the Father, reveals the Father's love by being among us, as one like us.