

Christmas Eve, 2024

Lo, O great mystery, *O magnum mysterium*,
and wonderful sacrament, *et admirabile sacramentum*,
that animals should see the newborn Lord, *ut animalia viderent Dominum natum*,
lying in a manger! *iacentem in praesepio!*
Blessed is the Virgin *Beata Virgo*
whose womb was worthy to bear, *cujus viscera meruerunt portare*
the Lord, Jesus Christ *Dominum Iesum Christum*.
Alleluia!

Throughout my life, I have been intrigued by the fact that aside from Jesus' earthly parents – Mary and Joseph – creatures, yes, barn animals, were believed to have been the first to lay eyes on the Savior of the World. How appropriate that you and I together, this our humble family parish in Brandon, VT who love and honor our animals - cats, dogs, canaries, chickens, horses – share this story tonight.

This opening text is from a response from the service of *Matins* for Christmas Day. It is a mystery – not Agatha Christie or Sherlock Holmes – but that thing we just don't know how to explain, not unlike Jesus' resurrection from the dead. How could that happen, we ask; how is that possible? I can't explain it. It is a mystery. Jesus' entrance into this world as well as his departure are things we simply cannot explain: they are mystery. Perhaps it was animals who first beheld the Savior for that very reason: they did not express what they were seeing: no "isn't he cute, looks just like his mother." Just quiet observation. Not unlike when you or I are sad or not feeling well, our animal companion enters the room where we are and silently tends to us.

Not only is this a mystery, it is a sacrament, says the text. We remember from our catechism or from confirmation classes that a sacrament is "an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace given by Christ as a sure and certain means by which we receive that grace." How is the first viewing of God's Son by barn animals a sacrament? Could it be that so many of these creatures had been used as burnt offerings to God through the centuries that an understanding of

what it means to sacrifice – to make holy – was realized between the animal world and its Savior? Behold the Lamb of God, who by his suffering and death takes away the sin of the world. The creatures are silent, but surely the morning stars are singing together, the rivers clapping their hands, the trees of the wood shouting for joy.

What is a myth? We often mistakenly dismiss it as something that isn't true, "an old wives' tale." A myth can explain a natural order, such as why the sun rises and sets, or something for which we often have no better explanation, not unlike the parables Jesus used in his teaching: who is my neighbor? it is the nearly dead stranger in the ditch by the side of the road. Or fables by Aesop which teach us, for example, why taking it slow like a tortoise often gets us there sooner than the speedy, over-achieving rabbit. Perhaps because the story of Jesus' birth appears only in Luke's Gospel, many dismiss it as an overly sentimental portrayal of the event, probably a myth. If that's so, the question remains why has it inspired humanity to produce some of its most magnificent art – paintings, music, poetry, plays, fiction and non-fiction – and perhaps more significantly that thing called "Christmas spirit" which brings differences of skin-color, country-of-origin, religious/non-religious affiliation to its knees. Just as the tortoise's victory over the hare, it's just as likely to have happened once upon a time or not, and when I look into the eyes of any animal who allows me to, I do not question the account of Jesus' birth.

Who are today's prophets? one of my professors asks. I rack my brain. A liberation theologian, a spokes-person for the poor, the needy, the suffering, the abused, all those forgotten in the U.S., Central America, in Africa; prisoners, refugees, children, care-givers, first responders?

Could the prophets of today be the creatures who were with Jesus at his coming into the world? Could it be that the trees whose hands are struggling to clap, the oceans and rivers whose voices have lost their ability to sing with joy, the mountains who are stripped of food for grazing, the fishes of the sea who are becoming extinct, the endangered elephants and rhinoceros, the birds who have drastically changed their migration paths or have entirely disappeared: could these be the prophets of today, yesterday and tomorrow to whom we have not listened in spite of their speaking to us since that holy birth?

*O great mystery and wonderful sacrament,
that the animals should see the newborn Lord,
lying in a manger.*

*Blessed is the Virgin
whose womb was worthy to bear
the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Alleluia!