

John 1.1-18
The Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord
25 December 2017
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Gloria in excelsis deo +

Beloved in the Lord and fellow Christmas worshippers: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Exordium

Today the earth must rejoice, and hell must quake. Angels sing for joy while demons tremble. For He who upholds moon and sun and stars can't even hold up His own little head. He who laid the foundations of the earth and cast the firmament above it cannot even grasp the tiniest pea with His pudgy little hands. He to whom the eyes of all look and He gives them their food in due season must cry out to be fed.

Mary holds God on her lap.

Joseph takes God into his arms.

And we cry out in joy, "The Son of God has become my Brother! God has cast lot with *me!*"

Let us join in singing the Exordium hymn, Rejoice! Rejoice! This Happy Morn, hymn 391.

The words to which we turn our attention today are those from the Gospel, and especially these words: "The Light, that enlightens every man, was coming into the world."

Oremus: haec, pater sancte, verba tua sunt, etc.

Being in utter darkness is completely stupefying.

Have you ever done it before? You lose all sense of everything. The wall that used to be at arm's length is nowhere to be found. The floor starts to slope. And you start to spin. Stay in it too long, and it's sure to come to no good.

That's the image that John taps into in the Gospel for today. Darkness. Not moon-lit nighttime. Not the darkness of the Flint Hills under a starry sky. Not the darkness of your street at night when the lights from other houses cast their beams. But utter darkness. Disorienting darkness. Spinning darkness.

And that's a scary, confusing, bewildering place to be. Even more scary when that darkness describes your spiritual room and space.

- You know God's there, or at least that there is a God. But reach out, and He can't be found.
- You know that there's some basis for life. But the floor keeps tilting. Now this way. Now that.
- You know that there's good and bad, right and wrong, sin and righteousness, but the darkness is spinning so that you can't ever get properly oriented.

In darkness like that, there's no hope. Hear that again. In such darkness there is no hope. Get down on all fours, crawl around, grope in the darkness, and you never know what you're going to bump into. Lie

flat on your back. But the darkness keeps spinning. Spread out your legs for a more stable stance, but the floor won't stop tilting. And it never will.

And in the darkness you start to invent things. You can't see them. But something's there. You imagine you've balanced yourself, only to find out your stance wasn't quite wide enough. And no matter how low you get to the floor, the darkness keeps spinning.

So it is with the human heart.

- Created by God, it was made corrupt.
- Created to know God, after the tragic fall into sin it is born without knowledge of Him.
- Created to see the Creator through the creature, it worships the creature, forsaking the Creator.
- Created to stand firm, its moral compass has gone haywire.
- Created with a firm purpose to serve others, it finds fulfillment in service of self.

And that might not be so bad...if it didn't describe also *your* heart.

But on Christmas Day, this is what we note and mark and celebrate: the Light has shone into the darkness. The ungraspable God has made Himself graspable. The infinitely powerful God has taken on the form of weakness.

And He sits on Mary's lap. And He's held in Joseph's hands.

Go out and look for God. Look high for Him. You will not find Him. Look low. No luck. Follow your thoughts to their highest apex. You won't find Him there. Seek Him in pleasure. And you'll come up empty handed. Look for Him in your heart. All you'll find is darkness. Pitch black darkness. And no God to see, to have, to hold.

Instead, God is found in the most unlikely manner in the most unlikely place. The invisible Creator takes on Himself the form of His visible creature. The sinless God who is only holy takes on the flesh of those who are only sinners and the only sinners. The ageless God becomes a zygote, an embryo, a breathing baby. A boy, then a man.

And dies a man's death.

And is laid in a tomb carved out of rock for the dead flesh of sinners.

Now, to be sure, you can get close to finding Him. You can crawl through darkness to Bethlehem's stable. You can stand at the foot of the cross.

But look to the right or the left of manger or cross, and you won't find Him. He is not the pious thoughts of St. Mary. He is not the worshipfulness of shepherds and magi. He is not the nobility of the centurion who recognized His innocence.

Let your heart ascend above the manger to find Him in the heavens. You won't. For there He is hidden away in majesty. Seek Him below in earth and matter, and you won't find Him. For though He is everywhere, He is everywhere concealed.

You will not find Him.

Except for here: in the flesh.

Look to the Virgin's womb, for that's where He's made His visible home. Look to the manger in Bethlehem, for there lies God. Look to the flesh borne by the eternal Word. Look to the dying flesh of the Son of God on the holy cross. For there's where God has chosen to be. And to be revealed. For "no one had ever seen God before. The only-begotten of the Father—This One has made Him known."

And what a relief that is. Trying to find and come to God apart from the flesh of Jesus Christ is like trying to jump over the Grand Canyon on your own. You can make a great show of it. Take a running start. Leap with all your might. But you'll only be dashed to pieces on the side of the canyon wall.

That is precisely the darkness of men. Which is to say, that is precisely your darkness and mine. Though we are God's creatures. The crown of His creation. Created in His own image—in the image of the One who would one Day assume our flesh. Though this is true, we are a corrupted generation. Overcome by the darkness. And in pitch darkness trying to kindle a light that can only come from outside our darkness.

And so we grasp about. Perhaps the light can be found in career. Perhaps in family. Perhaps in leisure. Perhaps in self-abandonment. But that is not the Light.

For the Light that enlightens all mankind comes into the world. He jumps the gap over the Grand Canyon.

And for that He is rightly called "the Light that enlightens all men."

And He may be grasped only by faith.

Now, let me be clear. It's not like faith "constructs" a reality. The worst addition ever to Christmas was Santa Claus. Because we say, "If you believe in Him, He's real; if you don't, He's not." And that's what we teach our children.

No. Christian faith doesn't operate like that. Christian faith is always rooted in reality and fact.

Look. We have four ancient, eye-witness sources that say the Son of God took on human flesh in the womb of the Virgin. That's more than we have for the Peloponnesian War. More than we have for the Persian Wars. More than we have for the existence of Pericles of Athens. And never mind the legends of the Greeks and Romans. There's *nothing* like an eye witness account for any of them.

But fellow-redeemed we have four ancient eye-witness sources that say that this Son of God was born. In Bethlehem. At a point in history, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Four ancient eye-witness sources that in the Child in Bethlehem the God and Lord of heaven and earth had cast His lost once for all with *us*. To such a degree that He chose to be beset by every human frailty.

- That He who does not need the bulls of Israel ate fishes and barley bread.
- That He who is the Living Water drank.
- That He who never sleeps slept.
- That He was happy and sad.
- That He laughed and cried.

- That His teeth chattered when He was freezing. And when it was too hot He soaked His clothing with sweat.
- That He smelled good after He took a bath; but not so much five days later.

Four ancient sources that this Son of God was put to death on the cross. And four ancient sources that He rose again from the dead and ascended into heaven. The Son of God. In the flesh. Fact.

Now, that's something faith doesn't make up. These things are not so because I believe them to be so. They are so with the same certainty that there is air and a sun and a moon. They are so with the same certainty that if I am alive I must have a father and a mother. They are so with the same surety that I am standing here, now, in this room. If I trust that *these* things are so, my faith has not been deceived.

So also, if you trust that the Son of God became flesh in the womb of the blessed Virgin, your faith has not been deceived, either.

Instead, in all confidence, your faith can say: In this Child of Bethlehem God is on *my* side. He has turned my darkness to light. Because in the manger in *my flesh* lies *the* Light.

And in light of the Light everything that made no sense now makes perfect sense. I know who God is. I know that He loves me with an infinite love. I know that He loves me so much that He didn't even spare His own Son, but gave Him up for me. With a sin-assuming, life-losing love that I might be counted righteous and have life. I even know what my purpose is in life: it's to walk through this life to heaven. Singlemindedly. For in the flesh of the Son of God heaven has been opened. And on this earth, it's to serve my neighbor in love for him, with the same love God has shown me in Christ.

Fellow-redeemed: the Light that enlightens every man has come into the world. Glory be to God! Glory be to God in the highest! Amen.

pax dei, etc.

sdg
jsb