

Eve of the Nativity of our Lord—December 24, 2022

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The glory of God shines forth from the manger as Jesus lay his head in the solemnity of his mother, Joseph, and the animals by his side. What would be the most important birth in the history of the world was witnessed by only two people that are mentioned in the Bible and the Lord himself slept in the lowliest places. Yet, that's exactly where he wanted to be. God's glory is hidden in Christ and what man often perceives and expects is not necessarily what God gives and how he works, at least as far as human wisdom goes. Thanks be to God that this is the case for he is God, you are not, and he has saved you in Christ, the Lord born of the Virgin Mary and was crucified on the cross.

In all this image before you tonight God makes himself known and who he is just as he has promised. The promise of Jesus was the hope of the people in the Old Testament. Their faith was a faith in Christ, and this was their righteousness before God. Their hearts and minds knew and trusted that God's word is never failing, and the promises made to them would come true in the promised Messiah. He would save them from their sins and be the one who brought them into the true Kingdom of God.

God's people rejoice in those promises and celebrate the Lord coming to dwell with his people 9 months before Christmas when the angel Gabriel appeared to the Virgin Mary and spoke those words to her: "you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Now, at Christmas, you celebrate the birth or nativity of your Lord and his life now outside his mother's womb. God was and is faithful and this is where he wanted to be.

God entered this world, and it was all for a purpose. Listen again to the proclamation of the angel, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." Those words spoken by the angel are life changing not just for the shepherds who were terrified that night tending to their flocks. It's for you too. There's great comfort in those words spoken by the angel. So, what is it? Did you hear it? What did the angel say? "For unto you" are the words of salvation proclaimed to you this night. Jesus came down from heaven, took on human flesh, and was born for you.

That's wonderful to hear and behold as you listen to the account St. Luke recorded by divine inspiration. It's the story of Christ's birth not just for the sake of telling a nice story but to proclaim to you this is all for your benefit. Isaiah prophesied this as well when he wrote, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given." This is the joy of Christmas; Christ is born for you. Listen to God this very moment. He cries out to you all, young and old, great, and small, near and far, dear people of God. Each one of you sitting here in this place tonight Jesus says to you, "I came, I was born all for you." God fixes your eyes on the manger to see your Lord lying there who has come for you.

The pastor and hymnwriter, Paul Gerhardt, puts this beautifully when he wrote, "O Jesus Christ, thy manger is my paradise at which my soul reclineth. For there, O Lord, doth lie the Word made flesh for us; here in thy grace forth shineth." Apart from faith in Christ who was lying in this manger, this is all unfathomable or even downright ridiculous. But that's the thing, the beautiful miraculous thing about Christmas. Jesus is born. This baby lying in the filth of a manger is God himself. The whole fullness of God dwells in him. God, your God, came down from heaven and dwelled among the dirt, filth, and stench of animals so that you would be redeemed and so you have.

That then begins to shape, form, and define Christmas. It's real, fleshy, and tangible. It's not abstract but very much a part of who you are as people. It's far greater than some sentiment. God didn't become an angel, or some spirit that floats around; no, God became man. He is like you in every way yet without sin. This is God's grace and mercy. Martin Luther once reflected upon this saying the devil himself would bow down had Jesus become an angel but can't stand the fact that the Word become flesh. Jesus is the eternal God in the flesh born of the virgin. Jesus is God with us, he is your brother even now as he has ascended to heaven, he is now forever fully God and fully man in his person.

As the infant Jesus lay his head resting that first night, he was born so that the day would come when his head would bow not in the manger of Bethlehem but in death as he hung on a cross at Golgotha. But know this and take it all to heart, that was for you. Christ coming into the world for you was so that you would be redeemed by his blood. He, the perfect sacrifice is the Lamb of God who has taken your sin upon himself paying in full what you rightly deserve and giving you in exchange his righteousness, glory, and life. That's mind boggling but it's true. God rightly condemns you in your sin and his judgment against it, that it deserves death and everlasting is hell is right and true. Yet, here is Jesus, this baby, who came into the world to save it, to save you. The same person Mary held in her arms and nursed from her own body is the same one she would see hanging naked, dead, and lifeless on a cross. Ask Mary what's the cost of sin and she could tell you, she knew. Look at Christ dear saints of God and see your redemption, your salvation in the baby born to Mary and behold him through the lens of the cross as you see where he would go all out of love for you.

See life in this all. Life amid death as by his death he has destroyed death and by his resurrection from the dead you stand righteous and holy before the throne of God. That's Jesus, the baby born in Bethlehem so long ago yet born "for you." You see then the significance of this all. If it were just mere history there would be no point in being here tonight or tomorrow, there would be no point to church at Christmas or anytime, you could find ways on your own to remember with fondness this nice story. But if this really is for you and God really delivers it all to you, then the example of the shepherds teaches you what your faith does. Did you catch what they did?

Listen again, "When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them." See these shepherds and marvel at their faith and confession of Jesus. Follow their example. Go to where Jesus is found. Go running to where his word is proclaimed, and his gifts of baptism and his own body and blood are given out to and for you. Go where Jesus is and he forgives your sin giving you life and salvation.

If you don't believe this, then there's no point. Christmas has the same meaning in your life as Halloween or Labor Day. If you like and want Christmas only as a sentiment or Jesus as a nice person to pull out of your pocket when you want him then the message of the angel tonight is falls on deaf ears and hardened hearts. Christmas hymns and stories are a matter of nostalgia and nice family traditions and that's the end of it. Don't have those things be the case. Don't let that be the way Christmas is understood and lived in your life. Listen and examine your life instead for that life apart from Christ will only end in agony and until then it will be a life in this world which is meaningless and superficial at best and simply a life lived in living hell at worst. But here's the thing, if this what you heard tonight and all of what the Bible says is true, and it is, then, your life is defined by Christ and his work. Everything is different in this world in how you view it, think about it, and live your own life. Your life is lived in this world that God entered, "the Word became flesh and dwelled among us."

Listen to the words from St. Paul to St. Titus you, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works."

When you forget this, neglect this, or push this aside you are playing with fire, eternal fire. The day is here, Jesus has come, he is here now, and he is coming again. Although the season of Advent is over, and Christmas is here your whole life is a living Advent looking toward the day when the Lord will come in glory to judge the living and the dead and his Kingdom will have no end. But you know what? That's wonderful because that means your redemption is drawing near. You know what you have because you know who you belong to as you await that day. Baptized into Christ you look forward to that day because you hear the message of the angel this night, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good

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news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

The Christmas story requires faith. Here’s the thing about faith, though, faith is gift of God worked by the Holy Spirit. “Faith comes by hearing and hearing the word of Christ.” God gives what he requires. He requires faith, he preaches, this all for you. He requires righteousness, he gives the righteousness of Jesus in the waters of your baptism. You see how God works? He does miraculous things. View the birth of Jesus anew this evening hearing all that has been read and said and rejoice as the people of God redeemed from sin, death, and the devil. Join with angels and their heavenly song. Go running with shepherds to see what all has happened. Each day in the morning when you get up remember who God has called you to be in Christ. Repent of your sin and cling to the mercy of God in Christ.

People of God, read God’s word daily because this baby born in Bethlehem is the Word of God in the flesh and he has the words of eternal life. Pray without ceasing and do not be anxious about each day. Do not fear even death for God teaches if he is for you, and he is in Christ, then who can be against you? Teach your children to live out the same and see Christmas for what it is as you confess this and pass it on to the next generation. Start right now being a family and a church that lives and breathes the word of God. Men, be men and stand on God’s word and lead your family in it and pray for steadfastness. Be a Christmas shepherd to your wife, kids, and coworkers. Take them to where Jesus is and confess the message of the angels to the world around you. Protect them from those who seek to tear them away from Christ, his church, and his word. Women, be women. Be like Mary who heard God’s word and trusted it no matter the cost would be. See her example too of one who followed where her husband, Joseph, led to guard and keep her and her child, Jesus, safe and protected pondering all these things in her heart and giving thanks to God.

It’s Christmas dear saints of God. What a wonderful thing this is to gather here tonight. The Christmas story is for you. Treasure these words as Mary would treasure all these things in her heart. Rejoice and give thanks that the Lord has come. Light has scattered the darkness. The quiet night bursts open with sound of salvation, your salvation, “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

God is where he wants to be. He’s here for you just as he lay in the dirty manger he was where he wanted to be and as he slept soundly as a babe, he was on his heroic course for you. “Softly from his lowly manger Jesus calls one and all, ‘You are free from danger. Children, from the sins that grieve you, you are freed; all you need I will surely give you.’ Come, then banish all your sadness! One and all, great and small, come with songs of gladness. We shall live with him forever there on high in that joy which will vanish never.” For unto a child is born, unto you a Son is given. You are his and he is yours “Glory to God in the Highest” now and forever.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.