

The Nativity of Our Lord

John 1:1-18 (Exodus 40:17-21, 34-38; Titus 3:4-7)

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church – Emmett, Idaho

December 25th Anno Domini 2006

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; herein thy grace forth shineth. TLH 81.1

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Our text is the Gospel appointed for this Christmas Day, the Nativity of our Lord, from the first chapter of John.

In nearly all Christian churches, the account of Jesus' birth in Luke chapter 2 is the reading appointed for either Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. This is where we hear of Mary, Joseph's espoused wife, being great with child, bringing forth her firstborn Son and wrapping him in swaddling clothes. We hear of the angel who brought glad tidings to the shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night, saying with the angel host *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men*. These are the events that the children of the Christian church grow up knowing, and they are the events that we heard last evening, on the Eve of this festival of the Nativity of our Lord.

The Evangelist John, who by divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit penned the words of the Gospel reading appointed for this day, included no account of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus Christ. In the opening verses of John's Gospel, one does not hear of Joseph and the Virgin Mary being visited by the angels. Nor does one hear of the events that took place

in Palestine in order to fulfill the prophetic Scriptures of the Old Testament. No, John begins his Gospel in a time before the nativity of Christ and even of John the Baptist, for that matter. In fact, the opening words of the Gospel of John are set in a time that precedes the genesis of the universe itself; a time when there was only the Word.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. In the very first verse of his Gospel, John cuts to the chase in revealing the identity of the Child who lay in the manger at Bethlehem. He takes his hearers back to creation, and reveals that the Word who was with God *was* God. He declares that Jesus, the Christ, or Anointed One of God, is the everlasting Son, who was with the Father from all eternity. And John further declares in verse 3 that this same Jesus is the Creator of all things. The little Lord Jesus who lay down his sweet head on the hay in the manger is in fact the Almighty God who fashioned and created the heavens and the earth! The little Child, to whom the wise men brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh in that humble stable at Bethlehem is the Lord GOD of Israel, who had chosen the Israelites as his people.

All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. With these words John attributes the creation of all things to Jesus. Saint Paul, in the first chapter of his epistle to the churches at Colossae, affirms this when he writes, *by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.* Not only had Jesus created the heavens and the earth and all things that are in them, he also is

the sustainer of all things. It was he who delivered his people Israel from of bondage in Egypt and led them into the promised land. It was he who, after the death of Moses and Joshua, governed them through the judges and then through the kings of Israel, the greatest of whom was his father David. It was the preincarnate Jesus who guided them and gave them hope while they were in captivity in Babylon, and he was their joy when they returned to the holy city of Jerusalem and rebuilt his temple. He was the Messiah, the Holy One of God. He was the One whom the Old Testament prophets had proclaimed everlasting King and Savior.

After declaring Jesus to be the Word who was God and the light of men, John speaks to us of what was happening when the Holy Spirit conceived him in the womb of the lowly and most humble virgin: *and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*. Jesus' conception and birth were the initial events in time of the incarnation of the Christ. The almighty and eternal God and Lord of the universe had accomplished the incomprehensible—the taking on of human flesh to dwell among his people. This was the ultimate stumbling block to both the Jews who lived in Jesus' day and all who are perishing today—that the infinite God who created all things would humble himself to the point of being made man. As finite human beings, we do not have the capacity to understand how this could come to be. The mere thought militates against all reason. How could the infinite God and creator of the universe take on flesh as a finite man? There is no satisfactory response this question posed by our feeble reason. St. Paul, writing to Timothy, describes it as the great mystery that God was manifested in the flesh. The Lord himself tells us that his ways are above our ways, and his thoughts above our thoughts. But he also has revealed to us that with God all things are possible,

and through the work of his Holy Spirit he has granted us the faith to believe this and all that he has revealed to us in Holy Scripture.

But even more important than understanding how this miraculous incarnation could come to pass is to understand *why* it came to pass. Christmas is indeed all about the incarnation and birth of our Lord, but even when we speak of the “true meaning of Christmas”, we are fooling ourselves if we do not acknowledge the reason that Christ the Lord took on flesh and dwelt among us. He did it for one purpose—to save mankind from sin and its consequences. The angel Gabriel, when he spoke to Joseph in a dream, told him that the child conceived in Mary's womb would be named Jesus, for he would save his people from their sins. God took on human flesh for only one reason—to suffer and die to atone for the sins of the world. The baby Jesus, who lay in the manger, was born so that he would suffer and die on the cross.

The world needed Christmas. It needed Christmas and Jesus' nativity because since the shameful fall of Adam and Eve every man, woman, and child in this world is born in sin and therefore is sinful and subject to sin's final consequence, death. Jesus did not create us human beings to be rebellious and thus mortal. We were created to be immortal and to live in perfect harmony with God and with one another. But we are fallen sinners who cannot of ourselves atone for our offenses to the perfect and holy Lord who made us. We cannot attain to his level. We cannot reconcile ourselves to God. Rather, God had to reconcile himself to us. This is why we even have the joys of Christmas to celebrate. As St. Paul writes to the Corinthians, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ. He who knew no sin became sin for us and was cursed even unto death

to pay the price for our sins. Paul writes to the churches of Philippi that, in the incarnation, when Jesus took upon himself the form of a servant, he was humbling himself. He made himself of no reputation and humbled himself to be made in the likeness of men. He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. For you see, dear Christians, Jesus' manger and stable have no significance without his cross. The cross is where the incarnation itself receives its significance. Jesus Christ, the almighty and everlasting Son of God, had to suffer and die in order to save that which was lost. The crucifixion had to come to pass in order for Christ to redeem fallen humankind. This is why the church throughout its history has displayed the crucifix and made it a visible element. For the crucifix depicts the fount and source of our faith—Christ and him crucified. In fact, Paul professed to know and preach nothing but Christ crucified, for this is the only way that we might have forgiveness. For as the Law of Moses had declared, without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

Christ Jesus died to redeem you from your sins. He paid the ransom to buy you back from Satan and his minions. And he declared that though he died for the sins of the whole world, only those who receive his gift in faith shall be saved. Whoever believes in him will not perish, but have everlasting life, as the famous passage from John chapter 3 proclaims. As God's children who have been cleansed in Holy Baptism, the washing of water by the Word, you have received the most blessed gift possible—the gift of faith and the forgiveness of sins. And today, dear Christians, you receive from the Lord Jesus the most precious Christmas gift—the holy body and blood of Jesus himself! For you see, the incarnation did not end when Jesus was resurrected bodily and received into heaven. He still

remains in human, bodily nature among you today and to the end of this world. Through the sacrament of his body and blood, Jesus gives you himself to eat and drink. His body and blood, Jesus tells us, are given and shed *for you*. He has given himself to his church as a tangible assurance of his promised forgiveness.

When Jesus was presented to the Lord forty days after his birth, a man named Simeon held him in his arms and blessed God. The Holy Spirit had promised him that he would not see death until he had seen the Christ. Looking at the babe in his arms, he said, *mine eyes have seen thy salvation*. Simeon was ready to depart in peace. Christians, throughout the history of the church, have received the sacraments and recognized them as the visible Gospel. God's people have beheld with their own eyes the promises attached to the lowly elements of water, bread, and wine. The Word who in the beginning was with God and became flesh to dwell among us still dwells among you today. For when you have received your Lord today in the blessed sacrament, you will have seen his salvation. You will have received the forgiveness of all of your sins and the assurance of everlasting life through Christ Jesus your Lord. In all of this, you will have seen the true meaning of Christmas.