

The Festival of the Holy Nativity of Our Lord
St. John 1:1-14: "Jesus' Birthday Means Life for You."
December 25, 2018 | Jerico Evangelical Lutheran Church

In Nomine Iesu

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EXORDIUM

Is it "Merry Christmas!" or "Happy Holidays!" We prefer "Merry Christmas" because Christ is "the reason for the season." If there is no birth at Bethlehem to celebrate, then we're left with a season of bright lights, glittering decorations, gift giving, and Santa Claus – but no Savior. On the other hand, "Happy Holidays" is not totally objectionable. "Holidays" comes from "Holy days," and the birth of the Christ-Child is a holy – a sacred – event.

While we can see the cultural tug-of-war between these two greetings, there seems to be no argument about the words "merry" and "happy." One means just about the same as the other. We want people to have merriment and happiness. But as nice as this is, our wish cannot make it happen.

This is a time of year that not everyone feels so cheerful. Some feel very alone with no one who seems to understand or care for them. For others the season is a reminder of happier times past and of loved ones no longer present. As much as they might appreciate the sentiment of a "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holidays," the warm feelings escape them.

You may be among those this morning who do not feel "merry." But you can still rejoice, even in your sorrows and troubles. You can rejoice because the Savior was born into the world today, the One who would defeat the devil, pay your debt of sin, and destroy your death. Jesus the Christ came to do this for you. He came to win your salvation, so that you would enjoy everlasting merriment and happiness with Him in heaven. Let us therefore rejoice in these glad tidings by singing our festival hymn, "Rejoice, Rejoice This Happy Morn!" (#142):

Rejoice, rejoice this happy morn!
A Savior unto us is born,
The Christ, the Lord of glory.
His lowly birth in Bethlehem
The angels from on high proclaim
And sing redemption's story.
My soul,
Extol
God's great favor;
Bless Him ever
For salvation.
Give Him praise and adoration!

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Merciful God, heavenly Father, who gave Your only begotten Son to become man, that through Him we might be made partakers of all Your heavenly gifts, grant that in true faith we may comfort ourselves with Your mercy and thus obtain the blessed fruits of His holy incarnation; through the same Your dear Son Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 59)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for this morning is taken from the first chapter of the Gospel according to St. John, beginning with the first verse. We read as follows in Jesus' name:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. / There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the Light, that all might believe through him. He was not the Light, but came to bear witness about the Light. / The true Light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, yet the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him. But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. / And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, God incarnate, eternally begotten and born in time, dear fellow redeemed:

Today is the birthday of Jesus. But we celebrate it differently than the way we celebrate the birthdays of friends and relatives. And that is as it should be. The birth of the Christ-Child should stand out. We would not do the day justice if we sang a quick round of the "Happy Birthday" song to Jesus before cutting into some festive birthday cake. Only the best will do for this occasion. So we bring out our most elaborate decorations. We give special gifts. We join the angels in singing "Glory to God in the highest!" We resolve to live holier lives to honor His name.

I

But even our best efforts fall short. No collection of beautiful things, no amount of riches, no high-sounding praise, and no good deeds are equal to what is declared in today's text: "*the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*" Who is "*the Word*"? "*The Word*" is the Son of God, begotten of the Father from eternity. He was with the Father in the beginning when God said, "*Let there be light*" (*Gen. 1:3*). As all creation was spoken into existence, the Son – the Word – was at work. "*All things were made through Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made.*" From the plants to the bugs to the birds to the fish to the cattle to humankind, all living things were given life through the Son.

But then death entered the world. Man and woman did not think they could *really* live unless they ate from the forbidden tree. They found that just the opposite was true. The LORD came and told the man, *"By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return"* (Gen. 3:19). Now their flesh would die, and their children would die, and their children's children and all the generations after them would die. The prophet Isaiah described the terrible outcome of Adam and Eve's sin: *"All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass"* (40:6-7).

And yet we wonder: Are we really so weak? Are we no more than blades of grass in this life? But look at everything we have accomplished! Look at our great cities! Look at our ingenuity and creativity! Look at how we have subdued the wild things of the earth! It is true that humans are capable of many things. But there is one thing they have not and never could master. They cannot stand against death.

If you come down with pneumonia or some kind of infection, you are given an antibiotic to combat the sickness. This medicine must be introduced into your body, so that you can get better. The entire human race needed something like this. We needed an antidote for the poison of sin which had worked its way all through us. What could counteract it? Isaiah continues, *"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever"* (v. 8). The Word stands forever. The Word is life.

And *"when the fullness of time had come"* (Gal. 4:4), *"the Word became flesh."* The Word who gave life to all things at creation now entered His creation in the most surprising and mysterious way – He bound human flesh to Himself. He did this by entering the small confines of a virgin's womb as a human embryo. A short time later, His heart began to beat. His arms and legs formed. His brain developed. Mary was obviously *"with child,"* but no one – not even Mary – fully grasped who this Child was.

His birth was greeted with joy as births so often are. We love to see new life enter the world. There is nothing as precious as a tiny, wide-eyed baby. But as Mary and Joseph and the shepherds looked down at Jesus and held Him in their arms, they were not simply looking at a cute newborn. They were staring into the eyes of God. They were holding the One who held up all things. They gently cradled Him who would save them from eternal destruction. They seemed to be superior in strength to this Infant. But their strength was only temporary. Their flesh would give out in time.

This is why *"the Word became flesh."* God became man to save humankind from its certain fate. He brought His life-giving power into the world of death. He came to dispel the darkness of sin by His life of perfect righteousness and by His innocent suffering and death. He was the antidote for the poison of sin. *"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."*

II

So Life entered the world on Christmas, but John writes that *"He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, yet the world did not know Him."* What a tragedy! Life had come for the dying, but they did not see what was before them. They pushed Him away. They did not want

Him. This still happens. The Savior came for all, but so many think they do not need Him. They do not believe their condition is that serious. They might celebrate Christmas but not with any real concern about their sin or their Savior.

But there are some who welcome Christ's coming in the right way. They approach Christmas with humility. They understand how corrupt the world is and their own heart. They celebrate Jesus' birth, because they know His birth means salvation.

Your birthday without Jesus' birthday would mean you are still in your sins. Your birthday is a special day, but you needed to be born again. Physical life in this world is only temporary; human flesh only lasts so long. You needed the spiritual life that Jesus obtained through His holy birth and life, His death, and resurrection. But none can conceive spiritual life in themselves. The dead cannot bring themselves to life. God must do this, and He does it through the Word.

John writes, *"But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."* Believers in Jesus, those whose hearts are filled with new life and hope, were given this spiritual life not through their own striving and efforts. They were born *"of God."* He chose them. He sent His Son for them, to save them. His holy life counts as their holy life. His death for sin counts as their death for sin.

Everything that Jesus accomplished during His time on earth is given to us now through His Word. Many of you received these blessings just after your birth by the power of the Word in baptism. This is when God filled you with life and claimed you as His child. Others came to faith later in life by the same powerful Word. Whenever it happened, the injection of the Gospel into your heart is when you really started to live. This is when the Lord of life entered your dying flesh to give you the hope of eternal life.

It was for your salvation that *"the Word became flesh."* This is why God's Son took on flesh and was born of the virgin Mary. Our humble decorations cannot properly adorn this day, our gifts cannot do it justice, our hymns of praise cannot fully express it, our best efforts cannot equal it. And yet, we do and give what we can in thankfulness to our Savior.

He is pleased with our lowly praises because He is pleased with us. He looks with favor upon us like a loving parent looks upon his dear child. He will not forget His child. He will continue to feed and nourish us with the food of life, with the nourishment of the Word, until we are finally transferred from here, from this life of trouble and sorrow, into His glorious kingdom of light.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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