

The Feast of the Holy Nativity of Our Lord
St. John 1:1-14: "God Came Down with Gifts."
December 25, 2022 | Jerico Evangelical Lutheran Church

In Nomine Iesu

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EXORDIUM

"Merry Christmas!" It rolls easily off the tongue this time of year. We might not use the word "merry" in any other month, but it seems perfectly fitting in December. In this otherwise dark time of year, we want people to find joy and happiness in Christmas. The word "Christmas" was first recorded in an old English source from A. D. 1038 as "Cristesmæsse." It is the combination of two words: "Christ" and "mass."

"Christ" is the special title given to the Savior of the world. It means, "anointed one." So when we say, "Jesus Christ," we are saying, "Jesus, the anointed one." Jesus was officially anointed as the Savior at His baptism in the Jordan River. The heavens opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in the form of a dove while the Father spoke from above, *"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased"* (Mat. 3:17). The incarnate Son of God was anointed *"to seek and to save the lost"* (Luk. 19:10), to give Himself as the atoning sacrifice for all sin.

But what about the word "mass"? That comes from the Latin term "missa" which has long been associated with the Service of Holy Communion. "Christmas" – "Christ-mass" – means the coming of the Christ to us in His Supper. In Holy Communion, we receive more than bread and wine. We receive the life-giving body and blood of the incarnate Son of God.

The eternal God took on flesh in the virgin Mary's womb and came to win our salvation by the sacrifice of His body and the shedding of His blood. He gives this same body and blood to us now for our forgiveness, our comfort, and our strength. Jesus' coming to save us and His continued presence with us is the reason we can be joyful today, even as we carry various burdens and sorrows.

So I say again, "Merry Christmas!" – "Merry Christ-mass!" The Christ was born for you, and He still comes to bless you. For these wonderful gifts, let us rise and sing our festival hymn, #142 ("Rejoice, Rejoice This Happy Morn!"):

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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The sermon text for today 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. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who came down from His exalted throne in heaven with gifts for you and me and all people, dear fellow redeemed:

The artistic depictions of the nativity often show the baby Jesus as the source of light. The faces of Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds shine as they look down on Jesus in the manger. One of our favorite Christmas hymns puts this idea into words: "Son of God, love's pure light / Radiant beams from Thy holy face" (ELH #140, v. 3). But in reality, Jesus did not glow with an inner light. He looked just like any other baby. What set Him apart for the witnesses of His birth was the word of the angels.

The angel Gabriel told Mary, "the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God" (Luk. 1:35). An angel of the Lord told Joseph, "do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Mat. 1:20). And then the angel told the shepherds the night of Jesus' birth, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord" (Luk. 2:11, KJV). They would find Him in Bethlehem not by looking for a shining baby, but for a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a humble manger.

So as they worshiped Him that day, they worshiped Him not because of what their eyes saw, but because of what their ears heard. And that is why we worship Him today. We worship Him because of what has been revealed to us about Him in God's holy Word. The Christian religion is not based on what we can see. It is a religion of faith – believing what we do not see.

That does not satisfy the people of the world. They demand proof of God's existence, proof of the virgin birth, proof of Christ's resurrection, proof that He still comes among us today. The proof that the Bible provides won't do—it has to be proof on their terms. But if we're talking about Santa Claus, then it's all about faith. "Don't ask questions; just believe!" I suppose in their minds, faith is fine when we're talking fantasy, but it isn't fine when we're talking fact.

So why is it that we are so confident that Jesus is who the Bible says He is? Why do we believe in Him? We believe because God the Holy Spirit has worked faith in our hearts through the powerful Word. We didn't decide to believe in Jesus; God decided to pull us out of the darkness of our sin and death and into the light of His grace.

But our faith is not a "blind faith" that has no evidence to go by. We have the evidence of eyewitnesses who saw what Jesus did and heard what He said. The evangelist John in today's reading says, *"the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory."* "The Word" is a special term that John uses to describe the Son of God. He writes that *"the Word"* was in the beginning, *"the Word"* was with God, and here's the part that makes it clear who He is: *"the Word was God."*

Once I was talking to a Jehovah's Witness about who Jesus was. She would not agree with me that the Bible calls Jesus God. I asked her to look up John 1 in her Bible. There her translation (a total mistranslation) said that *"the Word was a god,"* in the sense of being "divine" or "holy." But that is not what John wrote. He said, *"the Word was God."* God the Son has always existed with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. All things that were made in the beginning were made through the Son. All life and all light came through Him.

This Lord of life and light is the One the Father sent to be clothed in our flesh. He looked like a regular human being, but He was much more. The apostle Paul wrote about the Christ that *"in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily"* (Col. 2:9). That means that the Son of God was not just partially present in Jesus, but His entire person was now found in a human body.

Why not let His glory be seen by everyone around Him? Why not let His eternal light beam through His skin? It was because no sinner could have endured His bright presence. When Moses wanted to see God's glory, the LORD said, *"you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live"* (Exo. 33:20). The Son of God incarnate kept His glory hidden for our sake. He *"made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant"* (Phi. 2:7). He came to humble Himself, to put Himself below us in order to save us.

And that is hard to believe. Why would God do this for us? What is in it for Him? We think there always has to be an angle. For us there often is, but not for God. God sent His Son to take on our flesh out of love for us. He sent His Son to do for us what we are incapable of doing. The Son of God did not put Himself above the Law; He put Himself beneath it, so that He could fulfill God's commands for us. And He willingly went the way of suffering and the cross, so that full payment would be made for our sins.

If Jesus were just a man, nothing He did could count for you. But because He is God incarnate, *"the Word made flesh,"* everything He accomplished counts for you. His perfect keeping of the Law is for your righteousness. His innocent death on the cross is for your salvation. These gifts were intended for you long before you were born and long before Jesus was born. Right after the fall into sin, God revealed His plan to send a Savior, the woman's Seed, the devil's Destroyer.

That promised Savior was the infant baby Jesus lying in a manger in a little town with a bunch of poor people gathered around Him. *"He was in the world, and the world was made through Him,*

yet the world did not know Him." No one knew except those who had received a special invitation. They were not rich or famous or influential. They were people like us, sinful people, whose eyes of faith looked in awe upon the Promise fulfilled, Hope incarnate.

We are invited to join them in beholding this great mystery. Jesus was not born for them alone, but for all people of all time. You are hearing the good news today, because God wants you to hear it. He wants you to know that a Savior was born for you to save you from your sins – that there is a solution for the darkness in your heart and mind which has caused you to do dark things.

"The Word became flesh" not to bring God's righteous wrath down on your head, the punishment you deserve for your sins. The Son of God came down to earth *"full of grace and truth."* That's far better than presents spilling out from under your Christmas tree or brightly-colored boxes stacked in your living room. Jesus came to reconcile you with God the Father through His death in your place. He came to bring peace on earth by the shedding of His blood.

That is why when we hear again the account of our Savior's birth today, we see more than a baby in a manger. We see *"the breadth and length and height and depth"* of God's love for us (Eph. 3:18). We see *"the true Light, which enlightens everyone... coming into the world."* We see His glory, *"glory as of the only Son from the Father."* It is beyond our human comprehension, but it has been granted us to know it and to understand it by faith.

By His grace, through His Word of truth, Jesus has given us *"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."* Because you were baptized into Him, all of His life and light and glory and grace are now yours. You couldn't ask for better gifts at Christmas, and these gifts last forever.

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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