

John 1:1-18
The Festival of the Nativity of our Lord
December 25, 2023

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, the beloved words of John 1, highlighted by this verse: “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.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Two Sundays ago, I mentioned that John 1 is often thought to have been written by the evangelist as a hymn of sorts, a poetic beginning to meditate upon the Word (the Logos) that in the beginning was with God and was God and who – faithful to the Father – took it upon Himself to enter into the world to save the world.

Certainly, hymns among the faithful adorn Church history, including the very pages of the Scripture itself: Zechariah’s song, Mary’s, Simeon’s... just to name a few in this season. And, following in their footsteps, the Church has long used hymnody to meditate upon the plans and promises and purposes of God. The sermon hymn you just sang is one of the Church’s oldest surviving hymns... sung throughout the generations for nearly 1700 years to help us meditate upon the wondrous reality regarding He who is “Of the Father’s Love Begotten.”

But perhaps we make a mistake in assuming the purpose of hymns, whether those of the church hymnal or those of Scriptural record: we often think the hymn is meant to ascend our thoughts and minds to heavenly time and space, whereas the hymns of Scripture (and even the sermon hymn) were written to help us meditate upon Him who descended to earthly time and place. We misunderstand the apostle's exhortation to "set your mind on things above, where Christ is" if we do not recognize the all-defining truth that our eyes and hearts and souls were first directed to divine things here below, where Christ was. Because of the incarnation, to meditate upon the divine (to *receive* from the divine) does not mean to leave behind matters of flesh and blood. The shepherds may have had wondrous heavenly sights and sounds to report, but instead they reported of a child in a manger and all that the angelic report was proclaiming to them was happening on earth.

Likewise, John can dramatically *begin* with description of the most wondrous mysteries of the heavenly Trinity, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" ... but John dramatically *concludes* by pointing us to the greatest mystery of them all, not trapped in the heavens, but unveiled upon the earth: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

Thus, we do well every Christmas to remember that the very title of the day means about Christ *in the flesh*. We would be tempted to read the rest of John's opening verses and mentally reach to the heavens – matters of light overcoming darkness, grace and truth, of God never having been seen, but being made known... matters that sound 'spiritual' without the gravitational bonds of earthiness. Indeed, this is exactly what the early heretics – the gnostics – were proposing: a divine truth and knowledge that transcends the body, that dwells beyond the things of earth... so that what matters is not flesh and blood, but only the mind and the soul. Sounds eerily similar to our current generation, doesn't it?

But, listen to John's words more carefully and notice how the Word made flesh is not merely an 'incarnation and salvation trapped in the heavens.' John writes, "The true light, which enlightens everyone" – ooh, sounds heavenly! – yet, "was coming into the world." In fact, "He came to His own, and His own people did not receive him." You know the earthbound history of such rejection – Pharisees desiring to stone him, descendants of Abraham claiming him to have demons, townspeople desiring to throw him off a cliff, religious leaders plotting to crucify him. Such rejection wasn't confined to Christ's own mind, but played itself out in the towns of Israel during the days of Herod.

Again, we may be drawn in by *these* words of John's gospel: "To all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God" – sounds spiritual, sounds like something to which we must look to the stars to aspire for. "Ah," we say, "If only his own could have looked to the heavens and thought heavenly things, then they would have received him." But, where does it happen? Upon the earth! Paul says, those who are baptized with water and the Word (that's you!) have received the adoption as sons (children), "born of God" our text says! And, of some of those children (precisely, the eyewitnesses) John says: "We have *seen* his glory." And, the word translated "seen" means "to look upon." It's the same word we use in the English for the word "theater", where you go to view live, in-person, action. It's the same word Jesus uses when he asks the crowds regarding John, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see?" Or again, Jesus says of the hypocrites, "They practice their righteousness to be *seen* by men." Such is no mental-mind game happening spiritually, but a seeing of that which is physically before you: "We have seen his glory," John says of the Word made flesh.

Christmas is not Christmas if we allow the occasion to be about a dreamy sentimentality about God's love. Indeed,

Christmas is not even foremost a *day*; it's the Messiah, who became flesh and bone for you.

Such incarnate truth calls us to repent of our despair, for we often slump in our seats and wallow in our lives as if the God of heaven is disconnected from the struggles of earth. We interpret this world's darkness to be its naturally-created state, and Christ's light to be a heavenly solution tone-deaf to our daily, earthly problems.

But our text reminds us that *in the beginning* was the Word; He was there from creation's first day and natural beginning, and – even then – that creation He created was flesh and blood... His relationship with it - from the beginning - exalted the tangible daily life of creation. Flesh and blood was created to be holy, pure, righteous, undefiled.

The world's darkness is no naturally-created state, but is enemy to the world's own beginning beauty. We sinners are so disoriented in and by our sin that we defend darkness as if light, evil as if good, new sinful perversions as "it's-always-been-that-way" worldly norms. Even within the span of one generation, even one decade, have we not seen the world plunge itself into a deeper embrace of darkness, a greater satisfaction with sin, spiritual darkness seeking to redefine and repurpose God's physical creation... as if the tangible and material

and flesh-and-blood world that God created for us was divinely-intended for decay and destruction.

And, even where we rightly acknowledge the darkness of our days to be synonymous with evil, do we nevertheless still tend to hear that very ‘spiritually’, even citing that apostle’s description of the cosmic struggle: “we wrestle not against flesh-and-blood but against the powers and principalities of darkness.” Understand his words rightly: we don’t wrestle *against* flesh and blood – that’s not the enemy. But, as we do wrestle with the true enemy – the darkness of sin and death – we *do* wrestle *in* flesh and blood.

Is there any part of our baptismal life that is not lived out in body just as much in soul? Are you wrestling well against the powers of darkness when your mind acknowledges you are sinning, but – since it’s just your body and members sinning – let them go ahead and sin? No, St Paul calls it a war being waged between mind and members, between New Adam and Old, between Christ’s light and the devil’s darkness.

So, just as we see that our darkness has played out in very flesh-and-blood reality, God’s desire to return us to the light of His perfect creation has also played out in flesh-and-blood reality. The true light that enlightens everyone was *coming into the world*, John says. And, the Christ who came in the flesh, came “full of grace and truth.”

Here is another phrase that sounds like it's best captured in 'spiritual song,' so that we float off into 'spiritual' definition. We hear a word like 'grace' and we think only spiritually. And thus, its comfort does not weigh nearly as heavily in our hearts as does its supposed opposite, 'judgment'.... We fear the deserved judgment, because pain and suffering happens in flesh and blood. But we also fear repenting, because we fear such will rob us from bodily comforts and daily life conveniences. Indeed, we interpret judgment and our fear of it from a very flesh-and-blood standpoint.

But then shouldn't we cherish God's **grace**, for it too is found *in* flesh and blood (Christ in the manger, on the cross, in the sacrament)... but also *for* flesh and blood? In the beginning, the world was created in flesh and blood; why would it now be saved apart from flesh and blood? Why would God's grace and desire to bring light back into the darkness of His fallen creation... why would such salvation be confined to the spiritual? Not just a salvation for Adam's soul, leaving his divinely-formed body behind... but a salvation for body and soul, with ripple effect to every aspect of daily life. God's grace for man's relationship with God (*is* 'spiritual', for God is spirit!) but – flowing from that reconciliation – also God's grace for man's relationship with his own mind, his own body, his neighbor, the creation... all of those

relationships are very flesh-and-blood, aren't they? And, with Christ coming into the flesh, even our relationship with God is now found in human flesh and blood, redeemed and reconciled in flesh and blood.

How can we look at the child in the manger, or the sacrificial substitute bleeding and dying on the cross, and think only of him saving our souls, and not also – in their due order – our whole body and life?

Thus, the enfleshed Christ coming into the world to go to the cross came “full of grace and truth” – grace for our flesh-and-blood world, truth for our flesh-and-blood world.

How important for our right understanding of salvation and daily life in that salvation is this phrase “grace and truth”! If either of these ideas – grace and truth – are restricted to the spiritual, then they quickly become irrelevant to all of the frustrations of daily life in this broken world, and we are left to say, “Someday, God will deliver me; but, for today, I'm on my own.” No, in the beginning, God did not create the physical Creation to be ‘on its own’; thus, when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, He did so to bring the whole world into reconciliation with its Creator.

So, when you hear that the Christ came full of **grace**, you ought hear that for *daily* life as for *eternal* life. For eternal life, that

means salvation, redemption, sacramental gifts, that we may not die in our sins. Played out in daily life, that means repentance is met with forgiveness – not just between you and Christ, but you and all who belong to Christ... yes among the faithful: forgiveness, compassion, patience, sympathy, daily bread, Christian love... that we may not die in despair.

But, of course, if such grace is not grounded in truth, it quickly becomes abstract philosophical theory, and our daily lives float off into a sea of irrational relativism – just look at the society all around you.

But Christ came ‘in truth’ that our eternal life may be certain, and that our daily life may have meaning restored unto it. You know the world around it; without Christ, it is lost in a sea of lies... so that men are women, history is fiction, the perverse is to be celebrated, Satan is to be worshipped at State Capitols. But, with Christ, the Church calmly, peacefully, lives (though imperfectly) the beauty of marriage and the family, of vocation and daily bread, of God’s holiness in the face of all that is wicked and ungodly, God’s life in the playground of Satan’s death. Yes, how important for daily, flesh-and-blood life that Christ came in truth.

If *just* in truth, Christ is a mere teacher of history and morals and doctrine. But, along with the truth, grace – that you

may be confident that the truth of salvation history and of God's created/restored order for your daily life is reliable and beneficial, grounded in His compassion toward you, His good will for you... the very reward for which Christ suffered and died and gave up all, that you might have all.

This is why John says, "from His fullness we have all received." – Consider that term, "fullness": His righteousness for eternal life, His good will for daily life. His fullness fills your emptiness. His full righteousness fills the emptiness of your unrighteousness, and His full light fills the darkness of this world's daily life.

How can such complete reconciliation be denied, when He who comes in flesh and blood is the fullness of the Godhead *bodily* dwelling?... so that His fullness saves *everything* He touches. How does St Paul say it to the Ephesians: "[God] set forth in Christ a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him." ... meaning "all times, all things have their meaning, their purpose, their united definition in the truth and grace of God's reconciliation with the world in Christ Jesus. Apart from that, nothing but dark meaninglessness. But, in Christ, fullness, grace and truth, purpose and life everlasting" ... that – Christ's light in the world's darkness – is what belongs to the Church.

As Paul says it, “[God] gave Christ as head over all things to the Church, which is his body, the **fullness** of him, who fills all in all.”

And within that life of the Church that reflects the light of Christ before a dark and dying world... within that Church’s life, the sacramental bestowal of grace and truth that brings fullness to every day of life. Paul says: “So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith – that you, being grounded in love, may have strength to...know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the **fullness** of God.” A final time, Paul says to the Ephesians that the life of the Church is

“the building up of the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of faith... and the measure of the stature of the **fullness** of Christ... no longer children tossed to and fro by the waves and... by every wind of human cunning and deceitful schemes (or “spiritualisms”). Rather, speaking the truth in love (sounds like daily life, doesn’t it), we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.”

That may sound abstract... growing up into Christ...worthy of ‘spiritual’ song. But because, in Him, the fullness of the Godhead *bodily* dwells, thus your body and daily life is just as much saved by His light entering your darkness as is your soul and eternal life.

Christmas – Christ in the flesh, to be for the world the light of the world. So, rejoice that you are freed from sin’s chains, for

Christ is the **fullness** of your redemption; throw off the darkness of this world in your daily life, for Christ the **light** is the fullness of God's good will for each day; and eagerly cling to the promises of life everlasting, for Christ has come to us **in flesh and blood**, the fullness of God's grace and truth bodily dwelling.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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