

The Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord

25 December, Anno Domini 2024

Exodus 40:17-21, 34-36

Brothers and sisters of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who in lovingkindness humbled Himself to be born of the Virgin Mary,

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

It has always been God will to be among us. From the very beginning of Creation this was true. In the first days of creation God would walk in the garden. He bestowed upon His own image and Spirit. Though we were not God, we enjoyed perfect communion with Him. Our highest joy would have been to be hearing God speak and speaking to Him, truly divine and holy conversation. We would have walked with Him and delighted in the richness of creation. We would have been perfectly content. We would have found constant joy in one another and never tasted anger or jealousy or lust.

But that perfect unity and communion with God was lost when our first parents were no longer content with God. They thought there were other, better things they could have. They didn't want to be with God. They wanted to be like Him. And when they were no longer satisfied with God and His Word and His gifts, they found themselves not only estranged from Him, but in the throws of eternal death, crushed under their guilt, cowering in fear at the sound of God's presence. They didn't want Him close because they knew they should die. The once pleasant steps of God in the garden were now the tramping of doom. As we so often do, they tried to hide from God, hoping He wouldn't notice.

But God would not simply let us wander away from Him. He was not satisfied to remain divided from us. Our rebellion did not change His love for us at all. Unlike fickle man, who God is and how He feels about others isn't dependent upon them. And because of His deep and abiding love for those whom He had created in His

own image, He would not sit idly by and let us suffer the eternal damnation and suffering we had brought upon ourselves even though we completely deserved it. He took absolutely no delight in seeing man get what was coming to him.

Instead of turning away in disgust, God leaned in. He continued to draw near, to make Himself present in our midst to save us. It began with a promise to send a Savior, someone who would crush the serpent who had uttered the first lie in all of creation with the singular purpose of alienating man from God both now and for all of eternity. It wasn't that Satan offered us another viable way or something other good. The only thing he can offer is evil and death wrapped up in pretty paper and tied up with a shiny bow. He promises pleasure and happiness but inside is nothing but a conscience plagued with guilt, a sense of self-hatred because of what you have done, the abject terror of knowing that you should immediately be cast into the outer darkness where there is no happiness, no peace, not a drop of God's goodness or mercy. That is the gift of every sin that devil seeks to lure you into.

For that reason, God spoke directly to Satan and cursed him by promising to crush him. And in so doing, God promised to Adam and Eve and all their children that He would not leave us or forsake us but would be near to us and at last become one of us to redeem us.

And the Lord was always true to His Word. He continued to be with His people. First, as Adam and his faithful descendants after him clung to the promise, father telling children and children telling grandchildren. From Adam to Seth and all the way to Noah, the Word of God sustained the faithful as they looked to the great day of redemption when the Messiah would finally come, when God Himself would become man. Faith clung to the Word of God even as the years passed by and the earth grew ever more filled with violence and evil and unbelief until only Noah and his wife and his sons and their wives remained of the truth church. And as the winds roared and waves crashed all around them on the ark, Noah preached and consoled his family and even himself with God's sure promises. As Abraham was led about by God's direction, he was sustained only by the promise that through his line the promised offspring would come into the world and that his

descendants would one day take possession of the land of the Canaanites.

Then, after the children of Jacob had suffered under the slavery of the Egyptians for four hundred years God drew nearer. He was among His people in a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire. His presence was visible but terrifying. Much as today we might sense the presence of God's great power in tornadoes and hurricanes and erupting volcanoes, it was not comforting to God's people. It was a sign of His power to protect them and guide them. And, indeed, God did redeem them from Pharaoh's tyranny. But that was not redemption from sin. That was not freedom from death and eternal judgment. God can certainly do things to make your earthly situation better but if that is all He does or if that is all you desire, then having Him as your God is quite pointless because His wrath against your sin still hangs over you.

Thus God had Moses construct the tabernacle. And, most importantly, He had Moses construct the ark of the covenant and the mercy seat that sat over it. This was at last what was truly needed - a place where God would dwell amongst His people to hear their prayers and deliver them, a place where God would attach not only the promise of His presence but also the promise of forgiveness. Here the sacrifices would be offered. Here the blood would be spilled. Here atonement would be made. Yes, God is everywhere in all of creation. But only where He has promised, does He dwell to give us life and salvation. You can't get that out on a lake or deep in the quiet of the woods or sitting around the Christmas tree with your family. Those things can only be found where God promises to be and give them.

How wonderful that God, who fills all things in heaven and on earth, actually provided a place where He Himself would dwell among His people in a unique way! And there, where He descended in the cloud, the Israelites could point and say "There He is. He is not a God who is far away from us. We don't have to wonder or imagine if He is with us, if He hears our prayers, or if He forgives our sins. He is there, in His holy tabernacle which He actually desired for us to build. Why should He deign to take up residence among not just creation, but fallen

creation? Why should He dwell in what sinful hands have built? This is indeed marvelous in our eyes!”

And how much more incredible that God and His tabernacle went with Israel, to lead them and guide them. The presence of God moved with Israel to lead them to the Promised Land for forty years in the wilderness. When He moved, they moved. When He stopped, Israel stopped. Yes, of course, the whole earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof but how blessed is that place where God Himself wills to be and to offer life and salvation to all who call upon Him in faith. Wherever He is is a blessed and holy place. Even there in the wilderness where it would seem nothing good could be found, the people of Israel were always cared for and provided for. As the psalmist writes “As they go through the Valley of Baca they make it a well; they make it a place of springs.” (Psalm 84:6) Even the most arid and destitute of places are made rich and fertile as the goodness and lovingkindness of God make their dwelling place there.

Yet, even though God’s gracious presence was known and seen in the tabernacle and the ark, God was still not near enough to us. It was indeed, one might say, a step closer than God was before, but there was still division. The ark stood behind the veil of screen. Only the high priest could go in and that only once every year. He had to bring blood to atone for his sins and the sins of Israel. The blood had to be offered again and again because it was only a temporary substitute. We are not bulls or goats. God received the blood of animals as a place holder. They were really for our benefit because they reminded us that if we are to live, blood must be shed. It should be our blood because we are the ones who have sinned. We are the ones who should die. But God had promised another would die for us, He would die for us and bear God’s wrath on our behalf. The animals could only remind us of that.

Even the temple of Solomon as grand and glorious and awe-inspiring as it was, was not what God had promised. The curtain remained. We still stood in the constant reality that we were divided from God, that the Messiah had not yet come and opened the way back into God’s presence.

Only with what we celebrate this day, does that nearer presence of God which He had long promised come into view. But this doesn't come as we ascend to God in our thoughts. We aren't transported into heaven. We aren't waiting for an ecstatic, out-of-body experience to be with God. Our God is Immanuel. Our God is with us. Our God has come to dwell among us as our brother. He has taken our flesh as His own. He is not wrapped in fire or a cloud. He is not hidden behind a curtain. He has a face like your face. He has hands like your hands. He has wept bitter, salty tears. He has known the deepest grief and sorrow. He has suffered the greed and foolishness and evil of men. He suffered poverty, hunger, thirst, and fatigue as you do. He is like you in every way save one. Though He suffered all this, He never sinned. He never doubted the love or the promises of God His Father. He never sought to find His own or avoid His suffering and cross. He never grumbled under the burden placed upon Him. He never reviled or cursed those who falsely accused and condemned Him. He never sought revenge. He loved. He spoke the truth. He healed. He died.

In this Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary, God has drawn near to you and in Him you have been drawn near to God. The curtain is torn. Heaven has descended to earth that earth might be drawn up into heaven. The one who was born for you has died for you. He has paid for the sins that once made you filthy and unacceptable in the presence of God. His righteousness covers your unrighteousness so that you might come into the presence of the Father as a dear and beloved child, boldly and confidently making your requests known to Him because you know His love for you.

And this day, the God man draws nearer still. He gives to you His Body and Blood as true food and true drink in the Holy Communion. Here at the Communion rail, the life which once lay in the feeding trough is given to you to eat under bread and wine. That life is now your life. You live because He lives. Here in this Supper, Christ bestows upon you His own immortality. Even more than the Israelites in the wilderness who had the cloud and the tabernacle, more than the Israelites in the Promised Land who had the temple, you can point to the saving presence of God in

your midst. You know that God is present for you to save you wherever His Word is proclaimed and wherever the Supper of His Body and Blood are administered. You can tell all who will listen “There is my God for me. There He is to hear my prayers, forgive my sins, and help me!” God wants you to draw near to Him. He wants to be in your midst to bring you the peace of the one who was born and who died for you. He would not leave you as orphans nor is He a God who remains aloof from your pain and your sorrows. He has drawn near to be with you and to save you.

And you can be assured that one day Jesus will draw near once again. Not in humility but in power and glory. You and all will behold Him. You will rejoice because you know that in the day that you see Him again, in the day that He returns on the clouds to the sound of the trumpet, you will be lifted out of this valley of sorrow to be taken to the true and eternal promised land, your heavenly home. There, far out of the reach of sin and death and the devil, purged forever and completely of your sinful nature, you will enjoy the perfect, unveiled presence of God and you will know the joy and peace that have no end.

May this, the true joy of Christmas, be yours this day and every day as you rejoice that your God has drawn near to you to save you.