

John 1:1-18

The Nativity of Our Lord, Christmas Day + December 25, 2011
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls
Grace and Truth

The Word of the Lord from John 1:14: "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." This is the Word of the Lord.

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

Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way.
Christmastime is lots of fun, but you're far from okay.

We wish you a merry Christmas, we wish you a merry Christmas.
You're distracting yourself with Christmas and all of this cheer.

It would be a bummer if that's the best we could do for holiday carols. That's what it would be like without the miracle we celebrate today, and it's why it's good that we spend some time this morning gathered in this Divine Service, away from the rest of the celebration: the greatest gifts of all are here, for the greatest gifts of all are grace and truth.

The Word became flesh at Christmas. That's the miracle, that's why this day is so important. The Word, known better to you and me as Jesus, has been around since eternity. He has been God and with God from the beginning. God created all things by speaking; and since you can't very well speak without a Word, all things were created through Jesus—Jesus, the Word. The Word who became flesh at Christmas.

The Creator of all things had appeared on earth before. At Mt. Sinai in the book of Exodus, He descended in order to give His Ten Commandments to the people through Moses. He came with cloud and fire and smoke and trumpets, with appropriate awe-inspiring special effects that made the people terrified. He looked powerfully glorious when He gave His Law to Moses. But He didn't become flesh.

He told Moses to build the tabernacle, the tent of worship for the people of Israel. The inner room of the tabernacle would be the Holy of Holies, and that would be God's throne on earth. When the tabernacle was completed, the Lord entered: a cloud of glory overshadowed the tabernacle, then descended inside. It was frightening. It was glorious. The Lord was there to dwell among His people, to hear their prayers and accept their sacrifices. He came. He stayed. But He didn't become flesh.

Now, centuries later in Bethlehem, the Word becomes flesh. He dwells among us, says John; and we note in passing that the word for "dwelt" in our text is "tented." The Lord comes to His people and lives in a tent, a tabernacle, among them. This time, though, His tabernacle isn't made of cloth or stone. This time, the tabernacle is His body. The Word has become flesh. Jesus Christ, God from eternity, has now become fully man—yet remains fully God.

He dwells among His people, even more closely than before. This time around, though, there's no glory to be seen. Oh, there's the brief splash of angels singing *Glorias* to shepherds outside of town; but at Incarnation Central, the Creator of all things is swaddled up so that He can't move a muscle, and He's lying in a manger. There could hardly be a humbler birth for anyone, and the Lord's appearance here is far from the glorious sights of Sinai and the Holy of Holies. His fingers and toes are tiny, and He's not going to live out the day if a created girl named Mary doesn't nurse Him and keep Him warm. In a little while, the evil King Herod is going to come after Him to kill Him, and the defense of the Most High

God will be to have His parents run away with Him to Egypt. It's going to be like that throughout His life and death: except for a flash of splendor on the Mount of Transfiguration, He's going to look like a ordinary, average guy.

Yet our text says of the Word who became flesh, "We have seen His glory, glory as of the only-begotten Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." We have *seen* His glory: but how do you see the glory of the Word? The glory of the Word is not seen with the eyes: the glory of the Word is heard.

St. John declares that the glory of the Word is that He is full of grace and truth, and our text mentions "full of grace and truth" one more time a few verses later: "And from His *fullness* we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; *grace* and *truth* came through Jesus Christ."

The Law was given through Moses, the Moses who stood before the Lord when the Lord appeared gloriously before at Sinai and the tabernacle. The Lord spoke His Law to Moses, and Moses then proclaimed it to the people. The Law is good stuff. The Law is holy and true. But the Law isn't full, not in the sense that Jesus is full of grace and truth. The Law doesn't have anything to give: all it can do is point. It points out the good and it points out the bad. It points at you and says, "Thou shalt not" and "Thou shalt." "Do this, don't do that." "Don't be naughty; be nice." It also says, "*I'm* not going to do it: you do it." It doesn't give you the power to be good before God. In fact, it shows you your sin—it shows you how good you're *not* before God. So the Law is good and helpful, like a medical test at a hospital. It says, "You've got a problem." But it has nothing to give in the way of a solution. *That* doesn't make for a Merry Christmas.

Jesus doesn't become flesh to repeat His Law. He wasn't born of Mary to tell you right from wrong. As I said last night, you don't need the Incarnation to know that you should be nice instead of naughty: you can learn that lesson simply by singing through "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer." It's an utter, fatal tragedy when the Festival of the Incarnation of Our Lord is reduced down to "be nice, not naughty." If that's what Christmas is about, then the message of Christmas is, "You've got a problem—you're not as nice as you should be, and you can't fix it." That would properly be the Festival of Moses, not a celebration of Christ.

No, the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth come through Jesus Christ. Jesus isn't born of Mary to give the Law and tell you what to do, but to fulfill the Law and do it for you. He doesn't become flesh to receive your sacrifices, but to *be* the Sacrifice for your sin. He comes full of grace and truth, to give you grace and truth.

The Law can only point. Christ gives. He gives all that you need for eternal life. That's why He becomes flesh.

He's born in utter humility, wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger. That's not how kings start out—that's how the lives of lowliest servants begin; and from the very beginning, Christ is born to be the lowliest of servants to mankind. He does you the service of living a perfect life, of keeping that Law that points out your sin. Then comes the ultimate act of service: He bears your sins to the cross and suffers for them there. The sinless God-made-man becomes flesh to suffer God's wrath for man's sin. It's a terrible sacrifice to make. It's the act of the ultimate Servant. If you think that the manger is an ill-fitting place for the Son of God to spend His *first* day of life on earth, then the cross is certainly the wrong place for Him to breathe His last. But from birth to death, the Lord Jesus Christ is all about serving you for your salvation in complete humility. Is it fitting for Him to be in a manger or on the cross? Certainly not, but He does so in service to you.

That service is His glory, the glory that you see for now. Glory is found in sacrifice for others. That glory of Jesus is manifested for you in grace and truth. He pours out grace upon you. The Lord

doesn't point at you like the Law and say, "You need to find some forgiveness." He says, "I forgive you." He doesn't say, "The truth is that you're sinful and condemned" and stop there; He says, "I am the truth, and I have fulfilled the Law for you. I join you to Me, and so you have eternal life." That's the glory of the Word made flesh: He pours out grace upon grace upon you.

That's why you rejoice in the Incarnation, why you keep the Word becoming flesh at the center of this festival day. When you reduce today down to naughty versus nice, you repent because that isn't what today is about. When you diminish this day so that it's first and foremost about the gifts under the tree that are going to break anyway, you repent again. Where your sins creep at the back of your mind to rob you of joy, you confess them because of the Savior who is born. Today is about peace with God, peace won by the Son of God who became flesh to die in your place. Other gifts given and received today are reflections of those gifts of grace and truth. You have peace with God. It is His good will that you be redeemed. That's the miracle of Christmas, given by the Word made flesh, wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger, "asleep on the hay."

We don't have hay in here. We do have straw: it's part of the manger scene under the altar. I've gotten quite good at spreading straw around. I proved it last week during Holy Communion. Every time I stopped at the center of the altar to refill the paten or the chalice with the body or blood of our Lord, I stepped in the straw of the manger scene down below. Some of it stuck to my shoes every time; and by the time the Distribution was over, I'd spread straw pretty evenly back and forth along the altar rail. I'm sort of a neat-freak anyway, so I like a clean environment. I think that a clean church demonstrates reverence for God and a belief on behalf of the people there that something important is happening. So I wasn't especially pleased with myself for spreading straw. Near the end of the Distribution last Sunday, I said to the duty elder, "It looks like a stable up here."

Straw seems an embarrassingly poor thing to spread around a church when the Lord Jesus is present with His people in the Supper. I don't recommend it: you don't want a church to look like a barn. Yet, when Jesus was born, He chose such a humble birth to be our Savior. Today, He chooses such humble means as His proclaimed Word, and bread and wine, to be present with you. Present as He was in Bethlehem. Present with grace and truth, to fill you with grace and truth.

Oh, our Christmas hymns this day are not to distract us from bothersome days, bad habits and troubles to come. We sing of the miracle of the Word made flesh for our salvation. The Conqueror of sin, death and devil is born, full of grace and truth to give. So we sing:

What harm can sin and death then do?
The true God now abides with you.
Let hell and Satan rage and chafe,
Christ is your Brother—ye are safe.

For you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen