

Christmas Day 2019

Isaiah 52:7-10

Titus 2:11-14

John 1:1-18

Glory to God in the highest, and peace to His people on earth. Amen.

Today is a day of wonder and awe. In the face of skepticism, over and against the dehumanizing views of materialist rationalism, and overcoming the darkness of cynicism, Christmas Day is about light and life and truth. The Wisdom of God that was “appointed from eternity, from the beginning, from before the world began”¹ has come to dwell among us, and human existence is forever changed. The Word of God that creates, sustains, and restores the world has become the incarnate brother of all mankind, fulfilling the purpose of Israel, God’s chosen people. The God of the Bible is the God who comes down to be with His people, and to give Himself to us.

The eternal Word was made flesh, the Creator has become created, and through His incarnation, humanity itself is recreated. The hope of generations is fulfilled in the little baby boy, born in a little corner of the world, and laid in a little manger. The promise of God is fulfilled as He “astounds the people with wonder upon wonder”² and the order established by man is upended in favor of the new order of the new King. In the low estate of an animal’s feeding trough, the long-expected Messiah comes to seek and save the lost. The kings of the world seek honor, majesty, fame, fortune, submission and servitude. The new King, the One whose Kingdom unites heaven and earth, is a humble, deferential, and obedient Servant. A body was prepared for Him, and He came to do the will of the Father.³ From the moment of the birth of Christ, it was clear that He was a different kind of King with a different kind of Kingdom. The first throne of His glory was neither made with gold nor lined with plush velvet, rather it was coarse wood, crudely constructed, fit for a lamb to eat from, not for the Lamb of God to lie in.

The mystery of the incarnation was hinted at by Solomon when he prayed at the consecration of the first Temple in Jerusalem. Solomon’s prayer expressed wonder at the Shekinah of God dwelling on earth, and he also stated the mission of the people of Israel. “But will God really dwell on earth?” Solomon asked. “The heavens, even the highest heaven cannot contain you. How much less this Temple I have built.”⁴ The Temple was a grand structure, was made with the finest materials, and was treated with reverence and awe. The footstool of God within the Most Holy Place was plated in gold, and all the furnishings were gold and silver. Yet, Solomon still stood in wonder over the prospect that the glory of God would make an earthly dwelling in this place among the people. Solomon went on to pray, “As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your name... when he comes and prays toward this Temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you...”⁵ As the wise King Solomon correctly prayed, the purpose of Israel was to be a light to the nations. Isaiah said, “Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”⁶ Israel was God’s light to the world because from Israel the light of the world, the Christ, came.

Sometime before Solomon, after the Exodus from Egypt, the people of Israel were commanded to construct the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle was a movable structure in which the presence of God would remain until it was time for them to set out from wherever they made their

camp in the wilderness. The Spirit of God made its dwelling among the people, and they carried God around with them. After God established the ancient Israelites in their promised homeland, Solomon worked to build a Temple fit for the One True God. The Temple was where heaven and earth interlocked. As wondrous as it was for Solomon and the people of Israel, heaven and earth were not far apart. God was not far off, and His people could dwell in His presence. God established the Kingdom of Israel and made the Temple the place where His glory dwelled.

What was remarkable for the time about the Hebrew concept of God is that He was not fixed to a specific location. God is not territorial. While the Temple stood, the presence of God was fixed according to God's purpose, but it was not permanent. When the glory of God descended on Mary, she became the Tabernacle which housed the presence of God, and she carried God around with her, or in her womb. Jesus is said to have "tabernacled" among the people.⁷ He moved around with His followers; His flesh was the Tabernacle which housed the glory of God as the Word was made flesh. Now, since Christ lives in us, our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit; we are the people who carry God around. This is a great blessing, of course, but it is also an ambassadorship. We represent God before the rest of humanity.

The Second Commandment could be translated to say, "You shall not carry the Lord's name in vain." That is literally what it means. The misbehavior of confessing believers is a graver threat to God's name than the threats that come from non-believing skeptics, materialists, and cynics. Some skeptics will deny that Jesus ever existed, or that He was the product of synthesized myths from various traditions. Others will acknowledge that He was a man who taught some great things, knew some healing tricks, and died permanently like the rest of men. Such accusations don't discredit Christ among people nearly as much as believers who act like skeptics. Far too often, Christians act as if God does not exist, treating their neighbor with contempt, even though their neighbor was made in God's likeness.⁸ Materialists, who reject the existence of God, should be expected to live lives as those who are merely matter in motion. Hedonistic lifestyles make sense when there is no belief in right or wrong, when one refuses to accept the reality of the soul, and when the afterlife is viewed as childish fancy. Sadly, we get caught up in living according to the materialist philosophy, even though we are aware of the vanity of such pursuits. To reject the image of God, and to live as a body without a soul, is to degrade man, to degrade yourself, and degrade the work of God.

Another way that Christians carry God's name in vain is when we allow cynicism and dismay to overtake the hope and optimism inherent in living in a world redeemed by Christ. I often hear Christians speak of their hope in the world to come. They present a view of Christianity that sees the world as bleak and without hope. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. There is much in the human condition to be ashamed of. We sense the decline of beauty, of love, of friendship, of grace, and of compassion. We shy away from people out of suspicion and self-protection. Our cynicism has caused us to carry God's name in vain. Cynical Christians are worse than cynical non-believers, for cynical non-believers live out the true consequences of what they believe, while cynical Christians reveal a lack of faith in what they say they believe. This world is not beyond redemption; it has already been redeemed, including you and me. Wonder and awe at creation, at your fellow man, at the incarnation, and at God's loving pursuit of man overcomes cynicism.

Christ was not ashamed of human lowliness nor was He cynical about man. He went right down into the lowliness. He went down to the scandalous pregnancy of Mary. He went down to the dregs of society. He went down to the scandalous death of a criminal, traitor, and blasphemer.

We see Christ as the one who would not let anything get between Himself and the creation He loved. God insists on dwelling among humanity. Whether He is in the Tabernacle, the Temple, the womb of Mary, the lowly manger, or giving His Spirit to light the darkness of our hearts, God wants to be with us. Even though His own did not receive Him, Christ has not ceased in His work of seeking and saving the lost. Just as ancient Israel carried God around in their Tabernacle, we now carry the presence of God around with us. Having been blessed with the Divine Presence, let us go forth in hope, rejecting the base philosophies of the skeptics, the materialists, and the cynics. Rather, let us embrace the life-giving reality of Christ and His work. Let us embrace the true philosophy. Let us love Wisdom, appointed from eternity, the eternal perfect form of the Word made flesh.

Christ came into the world to establish a kingdom, but it is a different kind of kingdom because He is a different kind of king. However, it would be a mistake to assume that because Jesus said His Kingdom is not of this world that His Kingdom is not in this world. If Jesus is only a King in heaven, His incarnation is of little use to those of us languishing on earth. His incarnation is the launching of a new order, one in which the powers that dominated the old order are broken, defeated, and overthrown. The incarnation of Christ means that He now rules on earth as He does in heaven. His is the name that is above every name at which we bow and confess Him as Lord. It is a confession of hope, and His is a rule of love, hope, forgiveness, and life. The earthly powers look to establish authority to rule by intimidation and force. Christ rules the world by overcoming our hearts and minds through light and love. The Church lives while giving allegiance to Christ above all earthly power; this is how Christ establishes His kingdom on earth and rules in a tangible and practical way.

The beauty of it all is that Jesus reigns in humble glory. God is not interested in people lavishing praise on Him as if He needs His ego stroked. He is a loving God who appreciates that those whom He loves appreciate His grace, favor, and kindness. The incarnate Word, being both God and man, becomes the unique figure that can be God to His people, and can be the people before God. Jesus is the Servant prophesied in Isaiah, who does the job of Israel on their behalf. He brings the light of God into the world, as the message of salvation is found in God alone. Of Christ it was said, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor... It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”⁹

The God who once came down to be with His people continues to come down to be among us. He has become our brother, and has given us all that is His, including His own life-giving flesh and blood. He comes down from heaven, into our world, into our flesh, into our mouths, and into our bodies. To the world, this is foolish, but it is the wisdom of God in our eyes. As the ancients wondered at the incarnational presence of God in the manger, we are filled with wonder and awe at the incarnational presence of Christ in the Eucharist. These are the gifts of an incarnational reality that continues for us today. Blessed are You, Lord, Maker of heaven and earth, who sent your Wisdom to become flesh and blood, and who gives His flesh and blood for the life of the world.

May the peace that surpasses all understanding rule our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Proverbs 8:23

² Isaiah 29:14

³ Hebrews 10:5-7

⁴ 1Kings 8:27

⁵ 1Kings 8:41-43

⁶ Isaiah 60:3.

⁷ John 1:14.

⁸ James 3:9.

⁹ Isaiah 49:3,6.