

Advent Midweek Vespers – 2021
The Incarnation and Your Neighbor
(The Incarnation and a Sacrificial Spirit)
Romans 12:1-13
Hebrews 1:1-14

A wolf was in need. Hunger ravaged his body and the awareness of this need was pressing, day and night. Painfully aware of his condition, the wolf went to the only place he could go. The wolf went to the meadow. A lamb was there. Alone, the lamb looked steadfastly at the wolf. There was no fear, no urge to run, no question as to how this encounter would end. The wolf was pleased to see the lamb and the lamb was pleased to see the wolf. It was a giving moment. The wolf devours the lamb. Hunger is satisfied and the wolf departs in peace.

Christmas is approaching. You will sing this line in the near future: “Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see, Hail the Incarnate Deity!” (Hark! The Herald Angels Sing). It is a mystery of the highest order. God takes up His residence in the flesh of our humanity. Immanuel He is called – God with us. “Mild He lays His glory by, Born that man no more may die, Born to raise the sons of earth, Born to give them second birth.” In that Child – in a setting so seemingly inconsequential – “in him the fullness of the deity dwells bodily” (Colossians 2:9). The vastness of eternity, the power of creation, the source of life and He who is unending glory itself – all of that resides in this Child, in this stable, this manger, this lowly bed – He chooses this. Christmas is coming.

What sort of a Christmas do you want? There are multiple sorts, you know. The Christian heart longs for the only genuine Christmas that there is – a deeper knowledge of Immanuel, a receptive heart that is filled with a very present salvation, a very present Savior, a Christmas that enriches faith, that makes the soul dance and the eyes sing. There are so many sweet cultural things out there that lend themselves well to our celebrations, but nothing compares with the spiritual uplift of “God with us.” We are devoted to that essential reality. We are thoroughly devoted to Christmas in the raw, Christmas true and full, Christmas unencumbered by worldly distraction.

The wolf, as he departs the meadow in peace, notices something curious taking place. The power of the lamb is in him. What characterizes the lamb now begins to define the wolf. That is Christmas. The lamb is Christ and the wolf is you. When God became man, He fully intended to give Himself to you, that you might become like Him. Sometimes life sucks; sorry to say, but it’s true. How many of y’all have ever been in a bad place? Has loneliness, real and wretched, ever visited for an extended stay? Death of loved ones brings its own brand of sorrow; real loss, disruptive loss... it hurts. Worry, over valid concerns that have no quick answer – finances dripping red, marital discord, physical pain – worry puts us in a bad place. Here’s one that brings its own mental and emotional storm: Have you ever let someone down? Have you ever hurt someone by your own selfishness? Have you ever sacrificed someone else’s well-being on the altar of your personal advantage?

You are the wolf. Christ has a sacrificial spirit. That is why He came – to give Himself up for the benefit of others. Our sinful nature is quite at home taking advantage of others. It is a wretched trait. You have done it. You do it still. The old man within us is all about self. It is a

poor life, to treat others as vehicles for personal advantage. That is the world's way, the world's religion, the world's modus operandi – selfishness. I am the wolf. Christ is the Lamb. He came to give. Do you think that Jesus' life was sweet? Do you believe that Jesus is happy with His life? Oh, He had His enemies, His detractors. There were those who made His three years of ministry a daily struggle. But do you think that His life was sweet? What made it so? Oh, well, you say, He was God. God has it good. Do you think that He enjoyed giving?

Love God above all things; love your neighbor as yourself. What does it mean to sacrifice? Put others above yourself; give up certain things (valued things) for the well-being of others. You are the wolf. You only want others to sacrifice for you. You want to *be* served. You may want to sacrifice if it brings you honor, acclaim, rewards, perquisites, if you can cash it in. There is so much in this world that reinforces that false notion, that broken idea. Here is a satanic half-truth: only sacrifice yourself for those who appreciate it; only sacrifice yourself for those who deserve it. Is that you? Is that Christ?

There is power in the Lamb, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He wants you to feed on Him. You eat of His sacrifice. You become like Him. The emptiness of our old life is exposed. Living for self is an obvious formula for depression, the obvious opposite of joy, the obvious opposite of Christmas. Jesus said this: "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full" (John 10:10). Those words, "I have come" is a reference to the Incarnation – God being made man. You are alive with His life. He has seen to it. You are alive with His virtue. You cannot be connected to Him and not have His life, His virtue in you. It is His act, something He joyfully accomplishes in you. He said: "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from you can do nothing" (John 15:5). The sap of His life, His virtue feeds the branch of your soul and you learn what it is to sacrifice. Christmas knows no boundary. He brings His life into your own, day after day. Like Him you are. More like Him you will be.

Do you know where conflict arises? Personal angst and confusion and a lost sense of direction – do you know how these unhappy forces invade our hearts and minds? When we can't figure out whether we want to be a lamb or a wolf. Christ was unconfused. His allegiance was a one-way street. "I know where I came from and where I am going" (John 8:14). "Father, glorify your name" (John 12:28). He washed His disciples' feet. A gesture that is notable by its absence of pride. He is unconflicted because of His love for His Father, His love for you. He is the embodiment of a sacrificial spirit. That Spirit is alive in you. Each of you has been crucified with Christ and you no longer live but Christ lives in you. The life you live in the body you live by faith in the Son of God who loved you and gave Himself up for you (Galatians 2:20). Christmas knows no boundary. And here's where it gets even more lovely. Christ expresses His love for your neighbor through you. His life, His love, your neighbor – you get to play a role in that daily divine drama.

You and your body are a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1-2). Your life came from God and you offer it back to Him as you love your neighbor, as you manifest a sacrificial spirit for no other reason than that Christ sacrificed Himself for the world and you are a branch connected to that Vine, that Cross, that King. I have seen the Lamb in wolves. I have seen my Lord in the lives of His people. I have seen Christmas in the acts of believers who give of themselves without

thinking, regardless of what pain, what personal loss it might bring. Look for Christmas around you. You will find it. When you see it, greet your Lord, for He is with us. And come, eat of His sacrifice. I know that you hunger and thirst for righteousness. I also know that He feeds you with His life. His life is so powerful that it transforms you. Others will rejoice to see the Lamb of God in you. Wolves are made sheep here.

We all need Him. This is the meadow. We come to the place where He has promised to be – in His church. A sacrificial spirit is alive in this place for Christ is here. The Lord is here to bring His Incarnation to you, to feed you His body and blood, to bless you, to transform you and engender His living sacrifice in you. That is real. That is Christmas.