

The Nativity of Our Lord (Christmas Eve), December 24, 2020

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A Savior Born for You

Luke 2:1–16

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

Eph 1:2

And she gave birth to her firstborn Son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths and laid Him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. . . . And the angel said to [the shepherds], “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” (vv 7, 10–12).

Dear friends,

All year long we’ve been waiting for something, hoping for something, expecting something. The waves have come and gone and come again, getting closer each time. Through shutdowns and stay-at-home orders we zoomed this way and that until we couldn’t zoom any more. Political chaos has made us ornery and skeptical. Masks have made us uncomfortable. We’ve gotten stuck in ruts and tangled in webs of sin. And now we’re in the middle of a long, dark winter of loneliness, isolation, and depression. For many, this year really does feel like a witch has put us under a curse. Like it’s always winter, always winter and never Christmas. And even when we catch a glimpse of joy, when the feast is about to begin and the first glass is raised for a toast, something comes along and turns everything to stone.

It should make us pause and ask some questions of ourselves. For what are we waiting and hoping? From where, exactly, have we been expecting our salvation to come? Where have we thought the savior would be born? And how are we to know who the savior really is? I fear that we have spent month after month looking in the wrong places—looking to DC or Boston or ballot boxes or talking heads or internet rabbit holes or pharmaceutical labs and expecting to find our savior there. Even now, we’re tempted to believe that the savior has been born of Pfizer or Moderna or who knows where else. I say this not to diminish the importance of these things or even the good that may come of them. It’s our fault, not theirs, that our hopes are so easily deceived and led astray. It’s our fault, not theirs, that we fear and worship created things rather than the

Creator. It's our fault, not theirs, that we expect from government or medicine or business the good that only God can give. So today we pause, and repent.

This is why we need Christmas. This is why we need the first Christmas and Christmases past and future and especially *this* Christmas. By Christmas, I don't mean the tinsel and the swag and the presents and the candy canes. It's fine for us to decorate and feast and make Christmas big, but let's not lose the baby for the wrapping paper. The first Christmas had none of these things. Mary and Joseph were alone. The manger wasn't decorated. The shepherds had no eggnog. Despite the images we see on Christmas cards, I doubt that it was all bright and cheery. Yet the first Christmas had everything—everything they needed and everything we need. It had the Child.

The grinch may steal all the outward trappings of Christmas and leave behind a trail of sadness, but he can't get rid of the Holy Child. Joseph thought that he was taking pregnant Mary to Bethlehem because Caesar Augustus ordered a decree that all the world should be registered. The kings of the earth make their plans, but the Lord laughs. The joke's on them. While in that little town of Bethlehem, Mary's time came. She gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, of all places. That's how Christmas came—wrapped in rags and laid in a feed box for animals. It probably didn't look like much, but life and salvation are in this Child.

What the world needed then, and what we need now, was there in the manger. The birth of Jesus is good news of a great joy that will be for all the people, including us. As the angel told the shepherds, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Thank God for His messengers! Thank God that He didn't leave it to the shepherds or to us to figure out the meaning of Christmas or to find a savior on our own! God didn't hide the Savior. They were told exactly where the Savior would be and how they would know Him: He would be wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. So they went tripping over themselves to Bethlehem to see this marvelous thing. To see the Savior. As it says in Isaiah, "A little Child shall lead them" (11:6). This little Child shall lead us, too, through the times in which we live and whatever darkness lies ahead.

Those swaddling cloths are long gone now. That manger is no more. But the Holy Child, our Savior, Christ the Lord still lives. He lives though He was born to die. He lives though He was crucified. He lives though two thousand years have passed. Even now, He sits on the throne of His father David. He rules over heaven and earth. He came then and comes still to save us—to save us from long winters and dark years, from virus and death, from our tangled webs of sin. He comes to give us Christmas,

even amid the sadness. Everything else is just patchwork, just band aids and temporary fixes. Whatever the vaccines can do, they can't vaccinate against death. Whatever help bailouts might provide, they are no help for sin. But there was in Bethlehem and is still in Jesus Christ a better Savior, an eternal hope. Like a lion, His roar breaks the curse. He puts the witch to flight. His word and breath thaw stone, free us from sin and death, and make cold, hard hearts alive again. If you can't feel it yet, you will. If your legs are frozen solid and your hands are still stiff and the good news of great joy has reached your ears but not your insides, don't despair. The Day is coming when Christmas will transform our souls all the way through and touch every cell of our bodies and we will be reborn, too, and be alive in the endless world to come.

What Mary and Joseph received on that first Christmas, we receive again today. What the shepherds celebrated long ago, we celebrate now. What they had in the manger, we have in Holy Scripture and in the Holy Sacraments: Jesus our Savior.

FRIENDS, ALL OF CHRISTMAS IS OURS FOREVER IN HIM.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
