

### ***The Word Became Flesh***

In the name of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth, dear friends in Christ: St. Mark the Evangelist in his Gospel gives us no account of the birth of Jesus. He begins thirty years later with John the Baptizer preparing the way for the Lord's public appearing by terrifying sinners with the about to be unleashed wrath of God and pointing them to the One who will save them from it. St. Matthew, who we heard from this last Sunday, gives us the story of Jesus' birth from Joseph's perspective; how when he learned of his betrothed Mary's delicate condition he planned to divorce her quietly rather than expose her to public disgrace; but how an angel of the Lord assured him that her pregnancy was an act of God not of man. St. Luke gives us the dearly loved birth narrative we are most familiar with. It's told from the Virgin Mother's perspective and includes the details like the angels, the shepherds, and the lowly manger.

And then there is St. John, apparently the most Lutheran of the Evangelists. In the prologue of his Gospel, which we just heard, he skips over the earthly details of the Savior's birth and gets right to the "What does this mean?" Where Matthew and Luke stress the humanity of the infant Jesus and then move us gently to the as yet unseen truth that he is "Immanuel", God with us, John repeatedly hits us over the head to emphasize the divinity of Jesus' person, that in him the eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, unchanging God has become flesh.

He is none other than the eternal Word, who was with the Father in eternity and who is in every sense equally God with respect to the Father. He is all powerful Word by whom the Father called all things into existence and gave them order, form, and purpose. He is the source of all life – above all human life originally made in God's image. And he is the light that makes it possible for humans to see visually and more importantly to understand in the sense of "Oh, now I see".

Apart from him is only darkness. This is especially true since the fall into sin. Then mankind seeking to escape our place in the created order to become like God plunged humanity into spiritual darkness making it impossible for us to really see or to understand God. Indeed, for sinners to stand in the presence of the Lord and gaze upon his holiness and glory means death – which is why to reach us he had to tone it down, so to speak. His solution to the problem of man bringing a curse on creation by trying to be God (an impossible goal) was for God to become a man (which also seems not possible, but with God all things are). And then through this man who is God to bring light and life back into the world.

There is a painting of the nativity by the Dutch Master Gerard van Honthorst called the "*Adoration of the Shepherds*" that beautifully captures this idea. And this is one of the few occasions that I wish I had a projector and screen up here to show you. And no, I'm not asking for them, nor do I really want them. You'll just have to use your imagination. In this painting the Christ child lying in the manger is in the center. On one side are Mary and Joseph, and on the other are the Bethlehem shepherds several rows deep. Now, whenever an artist paints something, he has to consider where the light is coming from. This determines what's going to be illumined and what's going to be in shadow. But in this painting there are no candles or torches or lamps to light the otherwise dark scene in the stable. Instead, the Christ child himself is the source of light. The people around him are illumined as if sitting around a campfire. Mary

and Joseph, who are closest to him, reflect the most light. They can be seen clearly. The shepherds are a bit farther away, so reflect they less light – and that's just the first row of shepherds. Those farther back are increasingly in shadow and darkness.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, John tells us. And John would know. He sat close to Jesus and beheld his glory full of grace and truth. He sat at the Master's feet and listened to him teach and expound upon God's Word. He witnessed the miracles. He saw him transfigured on the mountain. He watched as he was crucified and suffered for our sin. He beheld the risen Lord. He watched as he ascended into heaven. John had a front row seat to it all. So naturally, John, in his life, reflected a lot of his light.

The thought I would most like to leave you with this Christmas day is that the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us still is flesh and still dwells among us. He dwells among us in his Word as it is proclaimed, as he himself said, "Who hears you, hears me." And when you hear him, his living Word becomes a part of you. Or say it another way, your flesh becomes his. You become a member of his body, the Church; his body that lives forever. He dwells bodily among us in his Sacrament by which the bread and wine become his flesh and blood given and shed for the forgiveness of sin, which in turn grants life and salvation. And he dwells among us bodily in the flesh of all fellow believers. And you can see him there, see him most particularly in their needs; again as he said, "I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was naked and you clothed me ... [and so on] ... for when you did it to the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."

The Word that became flesh still is flesh. He still dwells among us. He is the light of men. That light shines in the darkness. Sit close to the light. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***