

Christmas 2020

My sisters and brothers, Welcome to the weirdest Christmas any of us may have ever celebrated. A deadly pandemic scaring us, threatening us, and killing more people than our empathetic minds can even comprehend. A horrible virus we can't even see or sense, invisibly attacking us and our loved ones, forcing us to stay away from each other; keeping us from even touching each other, let alone embrace or hug each other at a time when we're longing to be held and reminded "All shall be well."

And that's just the pandemic, that's not even mentioning the economic fears of losing jobs, food, and homes. Nor is that all. We now find ourselves in a very strange and dark times with government leaders who seem to have given up on the challenges we face. Instead focusing all their time and energy not on the sick, the frightened and the marginalized, but focusing on re-counting people's votes so as to secure their power and authority for themselves.

And if all that wasn't enough, we're once again, for the millionth time having to re-examine how our society and culture treat people who are different color or shade of whiteness. And that doesn't even mention the children still locked in cages separated from their parents, or the prisoners locked in overcrowded jails teeming with an insidious virus.

The list sadly can go on and on this year. It's a year unlike any we have known or even imagined in our darkest nightmares. Wildfires, the day we woke up to red darkness all day; there have been too many weird things to count this year.

But while this new kind of Christmas might be new to us, I'd suggest it is a much more real Christmas, maybe even closer to the original Christmas. The readings we're about to hear have a fresher meaning to us now, a crazy emperor counting people in a census for more money, death and poverty, refugees.

A people walking in darkness, life being centered on the edge. A child born on the run, on the fringe of an empire of privilege; a mighty re-aligning, a child born to invite us to re-birth.

We call him our savior, but honesty? Maybe we never really believed we needed Saving. In the past, it didn't really look like we Needed rescuing while we sat around drinking with all our loved ones in our silly sweaters and Santa hats, opening more gifts than we ever needed, often comparing our gift with an eye on what someone else opened and maybe being a little jealous.

It seemed good, and to be honest, we probably miss it. Jesus was safe beneath the stained-glass windows and cozy in his crib, and all seemed right in the world. Maybe we didn't feel the need to be rescued by a savior except maybe to be rescued from Uncle Don's long drunken anecdotes for the hundredth time.

How many times have we all said we wish Christmas was about more than commercialism, and mall shopping and gifts we don't even need? Well, here it is, a Christmas much closer to the original spirit of Christmas from we've ever experienced.

I'm tempted to say "Be careful what you wish for, God always gives us what we once thought we wanted."

Personally, this Christmas feels holier to me than the others. Alone and stripped of all the commercialism, I have a better sense of the incarnation of God looking down on us in our lostness of God seeing us struggle to "hold it all together" and fearing we will fail of God knowing how hard so many fears are to keep at bay of God hearing all our prayers from the last year and diving into humanity to rescue us.

If this past year has taught us anything, it should be that we don't like being totally alone, that the things that are broken or threatening to destroy us cannot be fixed by us alone. Not only do we need each other more than ever before, we need something bigger than us, stronger than us, wiser than us to come and rescue us. It's a hot mess and we need help.

The people who walk in darkness, see a great light, and that light that leads us out of trouble is a tiny flame that will spread. God becomes one of us to teach us how to be human. We often think of the Incarnation as God's way of lifting us up to the heights of divinity, up to the heights of Heaven. But I'd suggest God comes not to take us out of this life, but to teach us how to be more human in it. We are created in God's image and that means God is the only one of us who fully human the Rest of us are incomplete humans and we need help. We need saving, rescuing from our broken, battered, and bruised incomplete humanness.

Tonight, will be the first time as your priest that I celebrate the Eucharist. As a priest, I've never gone this long without saying Mass. And while I deeply regret, we are so dispersed and cannot receive Communion together. I believe this mystery of the Eucharist is the Incarnation. By God's grace, divinity will come down from heaven and transform the humanity of bread and wine into God, but in doing so, that divinity will also transform our flesh and blood into a fuller humanity, teaching us how to be more human like God. Small, gently, life-giving power that transforms what we once thought we knew into a mystery beyond our understanding, saving us, rescuing us.

“Worshipping the Lord in the beauty of holiness “for the Grace of God appears ringing salvation to all, “purifying us”, reminding us in the voice of angels to “be not afraid”, bringing news of great joy and exultation for All people.

God in a tiny, poor brown, exiled body, a baby in a manger and a manger is just a Food bowl for animals. God in a tiny little wafer. What on earth can a mere stale wafer do in the midst of so much heartache, and pandemics, and earth and loss? What can a little baby do in the midst of warring madness of Kings and emperors and darkness? By the grace of God, A Lot. One tiny little light has the power to banish darkness and darkness must flee because its powerless to overcome even the smallest light. And if we invite that little light of God to come into us, then we combine all those little lights in each other, together, to shine in the darkness until it becomes brighter than the sun, a unity of light and a life of hope. And the word becomes flesh and dwells among us, full of light grace and truth

Oldest Christmas Sermon – by St. John Chrysostom (386AD)

“Golden Mouthed” Bp of Constantinople

Behold, a new and wonderous mystery. My ears resound to the Shepherd’ song, piping no soft melody, but changing full force a heavenly hymn. The Angeles sing the Archangels blend their voice in harmony. The Cherubim hymn their joyful praise. The Seraphim exalt his glory. All join to praise this holy feast-beholding God here on earth and man in heaven. He who is above, now dwells here below for our redemption, and he that was lowly is now raised by divine mercy.

Bethlehem resembles Heaven, hearing the singing of angelic voices from the stars. And in place of the sun, the sun of justice, ask not how, for where God wills, the order of nature yields. God willed, God had the power, God descended, God redeemed all things yield in obedience to God.

This day he who is born’ and he who is becomes what he was not. For when he was God, he became human, yet not departing from the Godhead which is his. Nor by any loss of Divinity when he became human.

And so the Kings have come to see the Heavenly King who came upon earth, not bringing with him angels nor Archangels nor thrones nor dominations,, nor powers, nor principalities, but treading a new and solitary path.

He comes forth from a spotless womb to be the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Since therefore all rejoice, I want to rejoice also, to share the choral dance to celebrate this festival. But I take part, not plucking a harp, nor shaking a staff, nor holding a torch, but holding in my arms the Cradle of Christ. For this is all my hope; this is my life, this is my salvation, this is my harp. And bearing it, I come singing with the angels “Glory to God in the highest, and with the Shepherds, Peace on Earth to people of Good will.

This day, he who was ineffably begotten of the father, was born for me in a way no tongue can tell, born again this season above the order of nature. His heavenly generation is true and his generation here on earth is true. As God, he is truly begotten of God, so also is human, he is truly born from Mary.

Since this Heavenly birth cannot be described, neither does his coming amongst us in these days permit too much curious scrutiny. Though I know a Virgin gave birth and I believe God was begotten before all-time began, I can only learn to venerate in silence and accept that this isn’t to be probed too curiously with wordy speech.

What can I say? What should I tell you? I behold a mother who gave birth. I can see a child come to this light by birth. I cannot comprehend how he was conceived. Nature is overcome, the boundaries of the established order set aside, where God so wills. It isn’t according to nature that this happened. Nature was resting while the will of God labored.

O ineffable Grace! The only begotten, who is before all time, who cannot be touched or perceived. Who is simple, without body, has now put on my body that is visible and liable to corruption? Why? For what reason? That coming amongst us he may teach us, and teaching,

lead us, by the hand to the things we cannot see. Since people won't believe what they cannot hear, but only what they can see, he came to show himself in a body that he might remove all doubt.

Christ, finding the holy soul and body of the Virgin, builds for himself a living temple, and as he willed, a formed a human body from the Virgin. And putting him on, came forth, unashamed of our lowly nature. For to God, it wasn't lowering to put on what he himself had made.

Let that handiwork be forever glorified which became the cloak of its own creator. Just as the first creation of flesh couldn't be made until the clay had come into God's hand, so neither could this corruptible body be glorified until it became the garment of its maker.

What else can I say? How can I possibly describe this birth to you? It fills me with astonishment. The ancient of days has become an infant. He who sits upon the sublime and heavenly throne now lies in a manger. He who cannot be touched, who is simple without complexity and incorporeal without a body now lies in our hands. He who breaks the bond of sinners is now bound by a blanket.

Come then and let's observe the feast. Come and let us commemorate the solemn festival. The chronicle of God's Nativity is truly wonderful. For this is the time when the ancient slavery is ended. The Devil is confounded, the power of death is broken, paradise is unlocked, the curse is taken away, error is driven out, truth has returned, and kindness of speech spreads on every side, a divine way of life is implanted on earth, Angels communicate with us without fear, and we speak with angels.

Why? Because God is now on Earth and we are now in heaven. On every side all things mingle. The word is now flesh that God can dwell with us. He became flesh. He didn't become God. He didn't become God. He was God always. Heaven could not hold him so he became one of us, received in a manger. Placed in a manger so that he by whom all creation is mourned, may receive an infant's food from his virgin mother.

So, the Father of all ages, as an infant at the breast, nestles in Mary's arms, that the Magi may more easily see him. The Magi have come and started standing against tyranny and the heavens give glory as the Lord is revealed by a star.

What else could I possibly say? Behold a child wrapped and lying in a manger.

Just as Eve being deceived said a word that caused death, so Mary being told truth, bought forth in the flesh a word that gave us eternal life. Eve's word led to the tree that drove them from Paradise. Mary's word led to the tree of the Cross which led a thief into Paradise.

Seeing people abandoning God and making idols to adore which hurt God, the Word of God the word of God, truly God, appeared as a person to set aright this falsehood. And in this veiled manner, has turned all adoration onto himself.

To him, then, who out of confusion has shown us a clear path, to Christ, to the Father, and to the Holy Spirit, let us offer all praise now and forever. Amen.

