

The Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ  
December 24, 2024  
Isaiah 9:2-7, Psalm 96, Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:1-20

### Come and Behold Him

We have watched and waited with anticipation during this Advent season, when the days have grown short and dark and cold. And now the long-awaited day has arrived. On every continent, the glad tidings are spreading, from Asia and the South Pacific and Europe, to Africa, Australia, to the Americas and beyond, as this special holy night is being celebrated. From majestic cathedrals whose spires soar in the sky, filled with rainbows of stained glass and the ethereal beauty of choirs chanting, to simple churches on broad prairies, where worshipers tramp through snow to get to services, from bustling city churches filled with readers and choristers busily hurrying about in preparation, to quiet country chapels where a few faithful gather in the candlelight to sing the cherished hymns and break the holy bread together, people are drawn to this night, this birth, for, as the hymn says, “the world in solemn stillness lay, to hear the angels sing,”

Most of us have heard the wondrous story many times before, how the young Mary, engaged to be married, was invited to bring the Christ, Emmanuel, the Son of the Most High into the world. The Emperor Augustus sent out a decree that everyone in the land be registered. So, Joseph traveled with Mary to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. While they were there, her time came to deliver the child. They searched in vain for a place to stay, and there was none. So finally, they were shown to a stable and she gave birth to Jesus in a manger, or cattle trough. Animals were their companions. The Lord of Glory, the Word, the Logos, was born in the straw in a shed, and no place on earth could ever be so glorious.

There were shepherds there, living in the fields. They saw an angel, and the dazzling glory of God shining around them, and they were pretty frightened. And just as the angel had assured Mary when informing her of God's call to her, the angel told the shepherds not to be afraid, for the angel did not bring wrath or destruction but good news of great, great joy, that the long awaited Savior had been born in their midst. They would find him, a little child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. And because the joy could not be contained and was swelling throughout heaven and earth, the shepherds heard the heavenly host singing Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among all people! The shepherds, eager to see the wonders that had taken place, hurried and found Mary and Joseph, and the holy child lying in the manger. They shared the wondrous things that were being proclaimed about the baby Jesus. And Mary treasured these things, and the shepherds returned to their fields, glorifying and praising God as they went.

This story happened long ago, and yet it is living, still. Year after year down through the ages, people of every culture, race, nation, tongue, young and old rich and poor, of every economic class and sexual orientation, have gathered on this night, to wonder, to worship, to hope, to tell the story, and to be transformed by it.

What brings us out this cold, rainy night, leaving warm candlelit homes filled with the aromas of delicious meals cooking, of young voices chattering and laughing with delight at the prospect of Santa's visit later in the night, of fellowship, of fun, of love? And as this is a difficult time of year for others, who have suffered loss, sorrow, and pain, so what glimmer of hope brought them here? What yearning is in our hearts, what do we long for, what, in our deepest heart of hearts are we looking for this Christmas 2024? What draws us, in hope, and with love, beyond ourselves? And though there is much goodness in this world, there is also struggle, suffering, strife, war,

loneliness, and death. What can kindle hope in our hearts, who can satisfy the longing for inner and outer peace, for forgiveness, for healing, for unconditional love?

The great good news of the Gospel is that God himself longs to come to us with love, and grace, and healing. Our reading from the book of Isaiah tells us that unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulders and his name shall be called, Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of peace. And of this kingdom there shall be no end. Christmas is the time of the Incarnation. Incarnation literally means being made flesh. In the life of Jesus, the child in the manger, the young rabbi and teacher, God chose to take on our humanity and pitch his tent among us, to share our experience, to walk with us, eat with us, laugh with us, suffer pain with us, rejoice with us, and teach us the ways of God and God's kingdom. In this tremendous gift of love, God is in solidarity with his creation, and knows of our hopes, joys, fears, sorrows, and grief. And ultimately, Jesus died to reconcile us to God, to restore the relationship of fellowship and love that we are all called to as the children of God. That is the story of Christmas. This is the great joy that the angels sang of that first Christmas. This is what gives us hope.

We can also have great hope because the ways of God are not what we expect. Our God is a God of surprises. The Holy One, the Lord, confounds conventional wisdom and turns it on its head. Jesus wasn't born to some wealthy noblewoman in a palatial mansion, but to a poor young Jewish girl in a cattle shed. He wasn't attended to by servants and crowds of prominent admirers, but his loving parents, shepherds (who were considered a socially inferior, rather uncouth group), and sheep and a donkey. And yet the manger where he lay was a true throne of grace, and those gathered there were so precious in his sight. And so are we. In her Magnificat, Mary marvels that the satiated rich will be sent empty away, and that the humble poor will be exalted. The mighty

will see their thrones crumble, and the poor will be satisfied. And finally, out of the love of Jesus, who would grow in stature in holiness and grace all the days of his life, would come the sacrifice on the cross that would conquer the power of death for ever. Christmas tells us that our God is a God of surprises, the one who makes the impossible, possible!

Finally, we can have great hope because this story is not just a tale of something that happened long ago but is gloriously happening today. In Christ, humanity and divinity are joined together always, and we are being transformed into a new creation. The Holy One came to Mary and Joseph and the shepherds that night, and is coming into the world, our world, still today. He longs to fill hungry hearts with his love, his peace, his healing his compassion. He is asking us to make a home for him in our lives just as they are, broken, imperfect, fearful, and also hopeful, gifted, loving, and joyful. He loves us, and wants to share our lives, with their good times and hard times, and bring healing, and peace, and deep joy. And we come, and we bring our longing, our anticipation, our wild hope to that manger tonight. And we will sing shortly in our Communion Hymn, O Little Town of Bethlehem, yet in the dark streets shineth, the everlasting light, the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight. And indeed, they are. The story from long, long ago, is also our story, as we seek light and hope in a troubled world. It is our story as we receive the Christ into our hearts, to accompany us on our personal journeys of transformation and healing. And it is the story of the Body of Christ as we share the in the Mystery of Christmas, of Emmanuel, God with us.

May we give thanks for the great good news that this day is born for us a Savior, who is Christ the Lord, and with great rejoicing, and ringing of bells, and singing, proclaim his love for the world. Amen. Merry, Merry Christmas!