

The Eve of the Nativity of Our Lord

24 December, Anno Domini 2023

St. Luke 2:1-14

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Beloved of God,

As we hear again the account of our Savior's birth, a story that is so familiar and hopefully comforting to us, it is good that we follow the example of St. Mary, the Mother of our Lord, and treasure up all these things and ponder them in our hearts. In this way they can be a comfort to us at all times, not just this one holy night of the year.

Consider all that Mary had to ponder. What was laid upon her was a holy and salutary cross. Gabriel had declared Mary to be favored and her cousin Elizabeth proclaimed her blessed among women. Yet, how hard and strange life was for her whom all generations would call blessed! I'm not sure she felt all that blessed as the plan of salvation continued to unfold. How fraught with danger and peril and struggle her life was already. Joseph nearly divorced her. He had struggled to believe what he had heard and needed the assurance of an angel to accept that Mary was in fact pregnant with the Son of God and had not been unfaithful to him. They had to make an arduous journey in the later months of her pregnancy. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the town was packed full of members of the house and lineage of David. The best accommodation they could find was a stable, leaving Mary to give birth to God lying on hay surrounded by the smell of animals and likely the animals themselves. She then had to lay her divine newborn in a feed trough. And then a bunch of grungy shepherds come racing in reporting that they had been visited by the angels of heaven who told them that they would find the Savior of the world wrapped in swaddling cloths lying in a manger. And let us not forget what happened only a few years later when the Holy Family was driven from their home in the dark of night because of the mad raging of lunatic Herod

whose lust for power drove him to slaughter the Holy Innocents in the region of Bethlehem. Shouldn't it have been easier? Shouldn't the presence of God paved a smoother path for them?

What does this mean? The answer to that question is so vital for us to ponder and treasure every day because it is the only source of comfort and hope in this life. Why would Mary, who so humbly believed the seemingly impossible news of Gabriel and whose faith and humble piety were so highly praised, suffer in such a way? And, truly, the better question, why did God's own Son have to suffer such tribulation and persecution beginning when He was still in the womb of His mother? And we know well that their afflictions endured their whole life through, culminating in the most degrading and violent crucifixion of Jesus.

We expect better for such good people. We expect that the mother of God's Son, let alone God's Son Himself, should be spared such terrible things. It's why the world is happy to fill churches for Christmas Eve and Easter but avoid church on Good Friday and most of the rest of the year. We want happy things. We want to feel good, especially about ourselves. We want to imagine that God is Santa Claus who just hands out presents, who makes everything in life pleasant, who gives gifts whether you're naughty or nice. Thus we are shocked and offended when there is suffering, when there is evil, when "good" people die, when our house goes up in flames, and most especially when God dares to point out that we are evil, that we do evil things, that we are not the good people that we have worked so desperately to convince ourselves and those around us that we are.

But what God's children celebrate this night and the reason we will gather again tomorrow around the trough of this altar is far deeper than simply happiness or vapid sentimentality. We stop in these hours to ponder the great mystery that God was incarnate, that the holy God took on the flesh of sinners. Naturally, one must ask why He would do such a thing. Was it curiosity? Was it so that He could show us how it's really done? Was it simply to walk around giving good life lessons? No. No. And no. To understand the purpose of the incarnation of God's Son you have to look at the cross, the culmination of Christ's time of humiliation in the

flesh of man. Only at Golgotha can we understand. Only when we see Him lifted up and dead can we rightly ponder and celebrate His birth.

Christ died under the hatred of man and the wrath of God. And He did so willingly because His death is our salvation. His death is the full atonement for our sin. His death is the death that we should endure. He died having lived the life of perfect faith and obedience as we should. There was no greater pleasure to Him than the will of His Father. The Word of God was His food and the promises of God His delight. No deceit was ever found in His mouth. No prideful desires. No covetousness or greed or lust or anger crossed His mind. All this should describe us. Perfect love of God and perfect love of neighbor at all times and under all circumstances. In no way does that describe us. Our hearts, minds, and hands are cesspools of pride, jealousy, idolatry, and adultery. Our lives are filled with turmoil, sickness, divorce, death, and affliction. We simply do not live in the fairy-tale life that we make this night of stars and angels and a baby out to be.

And that is precisely why it is such rich comfort to know that God did not despise the hard and painful life that we endure. He did not come in a way that is “appropriate” for God. He did not eschew suffering. He was not born into luxury or privilege. He was born into poverty and meekness and affliction. He suffered hatred and rejection. He submitted Himself to fallen parents, unjust governments, and even hypocritical and deceitful religious leaders. He renounced all ungodliness and worldly passions. He disciplined and controlled His flesh rather than indulging every thought and desire. He endured hunger and fatigue and poverty. He submitted every thought, word, and deed to the Word of God and cared nothing of the opinions of fickle and fallen men. He withstood the fiery darts of temptation that were constantly launched against Him.

All this so that onto His pure and innocent flesh might be pinned all of our self-indulgence, our despising of the things of God, our cruel and loveless words, our greed, and our laziness. He placed Himself right into the depths of our mess and filth and sorrow because that is the reality in which we live. He is the Savior of poor, miserable, heartbroken, hurting, lonely, persecuted, hated sinners. He is your

Savior. You do not need to pretend that your life is other than it is. You do not need to imagine that Christ is only the helper of those who help themselves or who deserve Him or have their lives put together. He is the helper of the helpless. He is the father of the fatherless, the husband of the widow, the friend of the friendless, the Savior of sinners. If this is your life, then behold the Son of God who wrapped Himself in your flesh and suffered this life with you, beside you, and for you. Behold the Christ who had no place to lay His head and was rejected by men. Behold the Christ who was hunted and persecuted not only by enemies but even by familiar friends with whom He broke bread.

I know for a fact that many of you are bearing very heavy and painful crosses right now, that you have to force a smile and say Merry Christmas to the cashier at the store even though it feels every but merry. You have suffered, you have groaned, you have offered up to God loud cries of lament. This night is not about fond memories or traditions. It is a night of the deepest comfort intended for you because God has heard your cries long before you have prayed them and answered them by descending from heaven and entering the darkness of this world in order to scatter the darkness. He came to conquer sin and death so that they might no longer fill you with fear and dread. He came to cast the devil and the wicked world down from their thrones and exalt the lowly to sit at His table in His kingdom which has no end.

These wonderful things are what are given to us this blessed night to ponder and treasure. And tomorrow, our Lord will descend to us again with healing in His wings, comforting us with the Gospel, wrapping His divinity in bread and wine to feed and strengthen us for the journey ahead. In the strength of these things we will wait for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ when He comes again on the clouds to deliver us from this great tribulation for all of eternity. God grant that this comfort be yours now and forever.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keeps hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.