

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

We hear the prophet Isaiah proclaim this night:

<sup>6</sup> For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
(Isaiah 9:6)

I begin this night with a very heart felt welcome to all gathered here to celebrate and to hear once again that a child has been born for us, a Son given to us who is grace and peace...who is from God our Father, and who is God among us. This child born this night is the light of hope for our darkened world, he is the sure and certain hope of new life...he is Jesus Christ, the only Son of God and all who see him and all who believed in Him, God gives the power to become like him, a child of God.

And so it is that we have come this night, into this church, to worship, and we see the church...looking its best in its finest decorations. As we look around, our hearts are filled as we lift up our voices to God in song, in prayer, and in thanksgiving. And as we look upon this Nativity, we give thanks and celebrate this new life amidst the ugliness and the confusion of our culture, amidst the darkness of violence and the cruelty of our culture and our world. This child born this night is grace upon grace, he is mercy, and he is salvation for all and not just those whom we choose, but those whom God chooses as the angel praises tell us in our Gospel tonight:

<sup>14</sup> Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. (Luke 2:14)

This, of course, is the old King James translation that can be read this way according to the Greek:  
Glory to the highest God, and on earth peace, good will or favor upon humans or humanity.  
The New Revised Standard Version reads...

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!"...

NOT good will or favor upon humans or humanity, rather, the NRSV reads, peace among those whom He favors.

While some may feel this newer translation is more politically correct it is where I think *we* take the wheels off the Christmas message. Peace to those whom God favors becomes in our culture, peace to whom "I" favor. In other words, we tend to see God's message as an entitlement, exclusively given to us tonight because we are here in this place, this church where we are sheltered from the world and all its elements. And "we" then feel we are entitled to choose whom God favors.

We have come here this night to hear the Good News that is this birth of Jesus Christ. We in turn consciencely and un-consciencely limit this message to those whom we as a church favor...those like ourselves and those we favor. If this were the case, this crèche, this Nativity would NOT have taken place in this vulgar and rude situation...this animal stall...Jesus would have been born in some lavish temple or cathedral with an army of attendants caring for the baby and Mary...and a literal army protecting him so that only the elite and noble would see or come near the child. But instead, tonight we get the harsh brutality of the world in this situation...that we have softened with our sentimentality and in doing so, we gloss over the real message of this Nativity.

Can we look at this situation without the interference of our sentimentality, our judgment, and our entitlement that we feel is given to us in this Nativity? Can we see the rude harshness of an unwed teenaged mother and her devout husband-to-be, immigrating to another land where they are not welcomed. Ironically, the time of this birth takes place in a culture of hospitality...meaning if a traveler entered into a new region, the traveler would find the village square and wait...wait until someone would eventually offer them a place to stay. But this was not the case for our young immigrants who are seeking a place to rest. They enter lowly Bethlehem, a dung heap as Luther called it, when compared with Jerusalem,<sup>1</sup> only to be left to shelter in a barn or a stable because nobody would give them a place to stay. It is here in this animal shelter that Mary gives birth to a Son and wraps him NOT in the finest of soft purple linen, rather she wraps the Son of God in rough pieces of cloth and lays him NOT in a golden crib, rather she lays Him in a grubby feeding trough. Nonetheless, in our sentimentality, we look at this scene as if we are looking upon a beautiful painting of a landscape and we are in awe of the beauty and miss the reality as well as the real reason for this setting.

But as I said, can we look at this scene without the interference and the influence of our entitlement and our sentiment? Would any of us wrap our new born baby with bands of dirty rags and then lay that child in a grimy mucky feeding trough. As we look upon our various nativity scenes can we smell the brutality and the harness of that scene or is it simply refreshed in our own scent of sentimentality? Does our sentimentality fill our hearts when we look at this precious scene or can we get ourselves out of the way and see the true meaning of this scene...the very presence of God right where we might not be so aware of God's existence? Can we see God in that place we dare not imagine?

This serene crèche, this beautiful Nativity is glorious, no doubt! But our sentimentality makes it that way...while our culture, and our world have obscured and converted the quintessence of this scene...and that being, that the very presence of God is where we do not see God nor would we want God to be. Here in this scene is a situation we would not place ourselves or our newborn babies in...but here is the very human form of God among us...the baby...Jesus Christ laying in the very brutality of this world and NOT in an entitled-sterile, comfortable, climate-controlled situation.

Likewise, can we see worship and praise of God happening in a place that is not a church or a place far removed from the glorious cathedrals, temples, and churches that we hold so sacredly in our hearts? This serene crèche, this beautiful Nativity is church, it is mass centered in Christ, it is Christmas and it is happening in a place where we ourselves might not want to be.

We may just see that this serene crèche, this Nativity is church, but can we see that church can also happen in a burned-out store front, or within a huddled group of wayward souls on a street corner or in a homeless shelter. Church can happen from a bedside table in a hospital room or in an apartment of a retirement community where the Sacraments are administered according to the Holy Gospel...this truly is church...this too is Christmas. And in all these places, the very presence of God is there, in this Holy Word and in these elements of bread and wine that is our Holy Eucharist, God is present and it is Christmas and it has nothing to do with the building or the place where it happens.

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<sup>1</sup> *Martin Luther's Christmas Book*, edited by Roland H. Bainton. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1948, The Shepherds, page 36.

Church happens where ever God wills it to happen according to God's presence in this Holy Word and wherever the Holy Sacraments are administered according to that Word. And tonight, here in this place, God is with us and yes, it is Christmas. Oh, what a holy night to be in the presence of God!

In this scene is God's gift of grace and salvation given to all the world out of pure love for the world from God. How then do we get to this this moment, this moment of peace with God? The Magi, who are not all that respected in this day and are considered to be "sorcerers" or "magicians", they are directed by their wisdom. They have the knowledge and wisdom to interpret the movements of the stars and the planets in the heavens and by their learning from the sages they will be drawn to this moment. The lowly shepherds, the outcasts of the culture are directed to this peaceful moment by a dramatic heavenly revelation that shows all around them and they follow that revelation. They turned from their ordinary job and chores and followed their hearts to that revelation. Mary and Joseph, two kids by our standards today, likewise go about their lives and are drawn into this moment. These ordinary people are drawn into this moment of peace that is captured in this scene that is before us in this Nativity of Christ.

But how do we get to this moment with God? We do not have an angel along with the glory of the Lord shining upon us to lead and guide us...how do we get to this moment of this serene peace with God? We don't have the star in the east to guide us nor we do not have the wisdom of the sages to help us understand, can we get to this moment of serenity with God? We don't have the road of scholarship and historical investigation to guide us...how then do we get to church and this place of peace with God?

As I said, Church happens where ever God wills it to happen. And the peace of God that passes all understanding comes when we recognize that God has come to us...but God comes to the very place that we abhor...that place that may be within ourselves that we detest, that rude and unwanted place that we hide away from others and hope they gaze upon us with the same sympathy and sentiment we gaze upon the harsh brutality of this Nativity. We get to this peaceful place with God by looking at this baby and recognizing our own vulnerability, our own humanity, and our own need for the grace and salvation that lies on the outskirts of our works and our self-righteousness. We are in God's peace and care when we recognize that this child, this Son of God has come down to earth, not to some lofty palace, temple, or cathedral, but in a lowly manger so that all may recognize God with us and among us in our own rude and vulnerable setting and then...recognize our eternity in *God's* glorious kingdom...and NOT the kingdoms we build with our assumptions and opinions about ourselves and others.

The Son of God, being rich beyond all imagination, became poor so that all might live in the wealth of eternity. God's weakness in this vulnerable baby becomes our strength and our virtue...NOT because we have earned it, not because we deserve it, or not because we sit in the right seat in a proper setting, but rather, because God gives it when we recognize our need for it no matter who we are, what we are, or where we are.

This is our gift of love given this night to us...to all and for all. God and Father of Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, on this holy night gives to us a Son, who is authority, who is the savior of all people,

and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. This is the Good News of great joy for all the people. May these Holy Words about our Lord and Savior be the thing that we like Mary keep in our hearts and ponder.

Tonight, Christmas is taking place right here among us...may the gift of grace we see in this birth be the gift we take from here to share with all!

May you all have a very blessed and holy Christmastide...

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen*