

25 December 2005
The Nativity of our Lord

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Vienna, VA

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“Skipping Christmas?”

Text: John 1:14

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

A great commotion has arisen the past few weeks over the fact that some churches, some large churches, and a few very prominent churches, decided to cancel Christmas. Oh, they didn't cancel the *holiday* – but they did cancel the Holy Day. They decided that they would not be holding services on Christmas. They wanted to make it a family day.

Now, not holding services on Christmas really isn't that much of a surprise – many churches, for years, have not held services on Christmas Day. What made this so *newsworthy* (if you will), was that Christmas fell on a Sunday this year, and so churches that cancel the Christmas Holy Day are also canceling the Lord's Day. And some churches even took this a step farther and cancelled the next Lord's Day as well, for it is New Year's Day, which (I dare say) is not going to be celebrated as a “family day” as much as a recovery day.

Now, I'm not bringing all this up to bash these other churches. We're not holier than they are. And what they are doing is really not all that particularly new! As I said, many churches have *never* had services on Christmas Day. Many people, even if their churches have services, don't come on Christmas Day – Christmas Eve is always much more crowded. And a couple of years ago it was John Grisham came up with this idea, when he wrote a book entitled *Skipping Christmas . . .* which wasn't about churches, but was about skipping all the hustle and bustle of Christmas and making it a family time.

But really, the problem goes even farther back than that, and deeper than that. I think it goes back to the attitude that you hear so much these days, that “*I can be a Christian without going to church.*” People today want to be spiritual without being religious. They want the inward without the outward. They want to separate the spiritual, the mystical, from the physical, from the church. And it follows, does it not, that if “*I can be a Christian without going to church,*” then “*I can also celebrate Christmas without going to church.*” So why have it at all? Why not just cancel Christmas, the Holy Day, in favor of Christmas, the holiday? It's all the same in my heart anyway.

Well, it is the Holy Gospel that is read each Christmas Day that blows-up that kind of thinking. And it blows it up by one simple, little phrase: ***“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”*** Christmas means that the almighty, eternal God doesn’t just *live in my heart* – but that He took on our flesh and bone, and forever united into one God and man. Christmas means that the physical and outward and the spiritual and inward are not two separate things – but in fact, are one. Our Saviour Jesus Christ is the God-man. The divine and human natures united in one flesh. And what He is, He will always be. He was not just a man for a while, and now He is back to being God. No! For then He would be no Saviour, but at best an example, an encourager, or one who can empathize with us in our plight. But no – when God sent His Son to take on our human nature at Christmas, **it was forever**. It was not just to help us, but to save us. It was to forever exalt our human nature from the depths of sin and death into which we plunged it, and lift us up to the glory and life of Heaven.

And so God came down to do just that. ***The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*** And He dwelt among us in the depths of our sin. He didn’t come where it was safe and clean, into a palace with servants and others to do His bidding. No, as we heard last night, He was born in a stable, laid in a manger, and visited by smelly shepherds. Shortly He will have to flee to Egypt for His life. When He begins His public ministry, He befriends not those everyone considered “religious,” but the outcasts and sinners, the tax collectors and prostitutes. *Because where the sin was, that’s where He wanted to be.* Because that’s what He came for, to take our sins away from us and put them on Himself. From our human nature to His . . . even when it meant going to the cross to die for that sin.

And that, according to John, is why we celebrate Christmas. It is why we gather together in the Lord’s House on Christmas Day – Sunday or not – because here, still today, is the Word made flesh, for us. The Word made flesh once crucified, but now risen from the dead and alive. And so the Word made flesh still speaking His Word to us. The Word made flesh giving us His body to eat and His blood to drink. The Word made flesh here with us sinners. *And the worse sinner you are, the more He wants to be here with you!* Most people think it’s the other way around – that God hangs out in church with holy people. Actually, no! Jesus comes to hang out with sinners, so that He can make us holy through the forgiveness of our sins.

And that, according to John, is not only why we celebrate Christmas, it is what makes God so glorious. His glory is not that He is so glorious, and He stays up in Heaven, and we have to tell Him how glorious He is! Not much point in that, is there? He’s got angels doing that for Him! No, His glory is that He came down to be with us. That He

loved and cared for us and His whole creation so much, that He would come down to rescue us. For someone who's strong and mighty is not glorious simply because he is strong and mighty. But if he uses that might to help and defend the weak – that is glorious. Someone who's rich is not glorious simply because she is rich. But if she uses that wealth to help the poor and needy – that is glorious. And while our God is glorious simply because of the fact that He is God – He shows us His glory even more in coming down to us, to help the helpless, to give life to those dead in sin, and to turn our shame into glory.

And that is what happened at Christmas. God did not consider taking on our human nature and becoming man humiliating or demeaning, but the greatest honor. For when God created the heavens and the earth, and when He created man, all was good. Perfectly good. And though we have plunged His wonderful creation into the cesspool of sin, He still sees the goodness and honor of His creation. And so He does not remain separate from it – keeping the inward separate from the outward, the spiritual separate from the physical. No, He comes right down into it, and is born as one of us, that we might be born again as children of God. God and man together, that we might be part of, and adopted into, His family . . . which makes Christmas Day the greatest “family day” of all! Not of earthly families, but of our heavenly family. The family we will have not only for this life, but forever.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.

And so we are here. Skipping some time at home perhaps, but in no way by that skipping Christmas! No, we are here with our family – our true family. Our Heavenly Father, our brother and Saviour Jesus, and our brothers and sisters in Christ. Because on Christmas, our God came to be with us, so we come to be with Him.

So do you have to go to church on Christmas? Well, no. Those who do not are not thereby condemned to hell. God is still a gracious and forgiving God. But why would we not be here? Why would we not want to be here? To rejoice, to receive, to remember. That our God has come to us, and is here for us, to honor us, to serve us, to exalt us, to love us, to forgive us. You do not *have* to come, and receive Him and His gifts. You do not have to open the gifts under your tree either. But why would you not? For here, as we entitled our Christmas CD this year, is the greatest gift of all. For you. A Son. Christ the Lord. Merry Christmas!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.