

6 December 2006
Advent 1 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Manifested in the Flesh”

Text: 1 Timothy 3:16

***“Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:
He was manifested in the flesh . . .”***

Is Christmas necessary?

Some people object to Christmas. Or, should I say, to what it has *become*. A time of over hype, over spending, and over indulgence.

Some people object because, they say, Jesus probably wasn't really born on December 25th, and so celebrating His birthday on that day doesn't make sense. And our doing so just confirms (as they knew all along) that we Christians have it all wrong!

And some people object on quasi-religious grounds, saying that we who are Christians need to be more sensitive to those who are not. Please, speak of “the holidays” or “winter break” instead.

So how do we answer this? *Is Christmas necessary?*

Well, the short answer is that: **yes, it is!** And the Scriptures that we heard tonight tell us why. Christmas is ***the mystery of godliness manifested***, or revealed to us, ***in the flesh***. Christmas is God revealing Himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ. *And that means that apart from Christmas, we could not know God.*

That's a pretty strong statement, that surprises some people. For, some object, what about the folks in the Old Testament? But we must remember that the Old Testament is all about Christmas; it is all about Jesus; it is all about the promises and preparations of God's coming in the flesh to save us from our sin. From the very first promise to the very last promise, from the Patriarchs to the Temple to the Prophets, the Old Testament points us to what would take place that night in Bethlehem. To the child born of a virgin, born without sin. The child who is Immanuel, God with us. (Is 7:14; Mt 1:21)

And so yes, God was revealing Himself to His people in the Old Testament, but revealing Himself as *this* God – the Christmas God. And so yes, Christmas is necessary, for we

cannot know God in any other way.

And it is the other religions in the world that help us see this. Those that do not have Christmas. For what do they know of God? Well, they know certain things. His power, which is evident in the world; His enormity; perhaps they sense that He is without beginning or end; that He sees all things; that He has given us life, and that therefore we are accountable to Him for that life; that He controls at least many things, if not all things.

But if you know all those things about God, you still do not know God. He is still a mystery to you. For what's He like? One day He seems kind, when the weather is nice and life is good; and the next He seems angry, when disaster strikes and my life falls apart! One day I may feel close to Him, and the next a million miles away. One day He seems all powerful, and the next impotent. Apart from Christmas, you may know a lot of things *about* God, and what He can *do*, but you cannot know Him.

For what's He like, *really*? And what does He think of us? Of *me*? Can I be sure? Or does that change too? What's He going to do to me in the end? What is He doing to me now? Does He care? Does He listen? Can I please Him? And if so, *how*?

Many people in our world have no answers to those – frightening! – questions. For them (without Christmas) God remains hidden, mysterious, and unknowable. And so what happens is that they come up with answers that they *hope* are right, of what they think God must be like, **but they can never be sure**. And so there remains those nagging doubts . . .

*To which we answer: **Christmas!*** If you want to know God, you cannot know Him more or better *or in any other way* than how He has revealed Himself to us: as a baby born and laid in a manger, who grows up to eat and live with tax collectors and sinners, and who then willingly goes to death on a cross. *That* is our almighty, all-knowing, all-present God – who didn't remain an unknowable God afar off, or demand that we figure Him out, or ascend to Him; but who rather came to us, as one of us, to save us, to serve us, and to reveal Himself to us. So that we could know Him. And knowing Him, love Him, and believe not just that He exists, but believe *in* Him.

And great is this mystery! For who can fully know how the unchangeable God sends His Son to be born as a man and grow as we do. That the One who controls all things, keeping the planets in their orbits, the stars in the sky, and feeding all creation, lies as a helpless baby in a manger. That He without beginning or ending, who is dependent on none, lies helpless as a newborn, dependent on His mother for warmth and food. That the perfect, holy God desires to live among sinful people. Is this not a wonder?

And then this: that this incarnate Son of God would ascend the cross for us. For this is why He came and was born: to be manhandled by His own creatures, nailed to a cross, hung there as a spectacle for all to mock, and the Lord of Life, die. That He would take our sin upon Himself, all that we who are stuck in sin and death might live.

And so in the manger, on the cross, our questions about God are answered. There we see Him as He wants to be seen. And there you see not just part of God, but all of God. For as Jesus said, ***“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”*** If you know Jesus, you know the Father. You know Him how He wants to be known. A loving God, a merciful God, a God not far off, but with us. A God who does not overlook our sin, but has come to deal with it. Who would rather He die than we die. Who has come to destroy the works of the devil. He is a God who cares, who listens, who forgives. A God we do not have to *hope* to know, but who we can *truly* know.

And that is what Advent is all about. This time of repentance, of hope, of anticipation. The world, not knowing God, has substituted what it is hoping for and waiting for – gifts, and peace, and temporary joy.

It doesn't have to be so. Rather, Advent is knowing that the God for whom we are hoping and waiting and anticipating to come again and take us home to Heaven . . . *has already come*, once, in the flesh, to provide that way for us in the forgiveness of our sins. So that when He comes again, we will fear not, but know Him. For we do know Him. Yes, He is God manifested in the flesh. God for us.

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