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Christmas Eve

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“A Love Story”

Merry Christmas!

Atheists are no longer ignoring Christmas - now they are attacking it. Not just in that they don't want folks to say “Merry Christmas” anymore - that movement's been going on for a while, and has pretty much run its course, I think. No, this year they tried a new tactic: they have begun to call the Nativity scene *hate speech*, and therefore the displaying of it should be a *hate crime*. For, say the atheists, it is hateful that Christians are saying with their Nativity scene that unless you believe in and accept this baby as your Saviour, then you are condemned to hell.

Well, the atheists got the *meaning* of the nativity scene exactly right. That *is* exactly what Christmas is all about. ***For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.*** The message of Christmas is not just that a baby is born, but that God is born a man, come to save us from sin, death, the devil, and yes, from hell itself. And without Him, we have no hope. Without Him, we are the people walking in the deep darkness of the sin and death in our world. Without Him, the sins which separate us from our holy Father will do so forever.

And so that is the reason for our joy this night, that the grace of God has appeared. ***For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.*** The Son of God is incarnate as the baby Jesus to defeat our enemies, and to reconcile us to His Father. To strip satan of His power and provide the forgiveness of our sins. To overcome death and the grave, and give us the gift of eternal life. **His weapon:** His blood. **His guard:** shepherds and fishermen. **His fortress:** a manger, some straw, and swaddling clothes. And against these, satan stands no chance. With these, we are saved.

But while the atheists are exactly right about the *meaning* of the Nativity, they are exactly wrong about the *motive* for it - for it is not hate speech, but a demonstration of the deepest love. For as John proclaimed to us: ***In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation*** - or the atonement, the sacrifice - ***for our sins.*** And so tonight we see that when God said He loves you, He meant it. He meant it not just in words, but in deed. From throne, to manger, to cross, to throne again, that we might be with Him and live with Him forever.

And so tonight there is no hate speech, but a love story. Not between a man and a woman, or a virgin and her child - but between God and men. And not just some men, but all men. For this was the message of the angel, this **good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people**. That God made our human nature His own. In God the Son, *the two became one flesh*, that we might be His own. **Not to be a God we can live with, but one we can't live without.**

And that's really the crux of the issue right there. If Jesus is just a God we can live with (or not), then He's okay. He's just an option, and optional. You can take Him, leave Him, choose another, or none of the above. And people are comfortable with that kind of Jesus - including atheists.

But if Jesus is the God we cannot live without, then we are making a very important statement: *that we need Him*. That we need what only He can provide. We need His forgiveness for our sin. We need His life for our death. . . . The thing is: we don't want to be needy, we don't want to be sinners, we don't want to be told there's anything wrong with us or what we do - *but that doesn't change the reality*. And so what is hateful is not to point out our neediness and sin - but to ignore it. To pretend as if everything is okay and allow people to die with no hope or a false hope. But love speaks - both of our neediness and sin, and of the true hope and remedy we have in this newborn baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and named Jesus.

That's why Christmas is so loud! Christmas is what the prophets like Isaiah and Micah proclaimed for thousands of years. It is when the multitude of angels broke out in a great symphony of song to proclaim this birth to the shepherds. And today in words and hymns and carols, the church announces this good news in churches, in cards, on street corners, metro stations, and even in shopping malls. Because this is not hate speech, but the love story around which the history of the world has been built. ***That God so loved the world that He gave his only-begotten Son***. To be born for us, to die on the cross for us, to rise from the dead for us. To give us hope and joy.

And so tonight we are joyous with a joy the devil knows not, for the devil knows no joy. He knows only hate, and cannot stand it when any of us have any peace or love or joy. And so this night when our peace, love, and joy was born for us, satan is miserable. Especially because we do not deserve such a gift - that makes it even worse! But this love of God cannot be stopped. This love of God not just for the world, but for you. And so it was not in spite of, but because of, our unworthiness, that God sent His Son this night. That the grace of God which appeared to all men - to peasants, shepherds, and kings - might also appear to you and me and all people, that all see in this child named Jesus their Saviour, their life, and their hope. **That we see in this child not just the God we cannot live without, but the God**

who didn't want to live without us. And so who came, in love, this night.

So sing out in joy this night, and confess in joy all the year through! ***For beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.***

Merry Christmas!

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