

25 December 2016
The Nativity of Our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A Great and Mighty Wonder”

Text: John 1:1-14; Hebrews 1:1-6; Isaiah 52:7-10

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

The Word became flesh. The Light of life has pierced the darkness of death. The Creator has entered His creation as a creature. The perfect and sinless One has come to redeem a sinful world. The Truth has come to set straight a world of lies. The grace of God has appeared and as we heard last night, is *wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger.*

And the world yawns. Yeah, we've heard the story before. It's the same every year.

Others who do not yawn rage against this story as a threat to them and the way they want to live their life. The truth is not always welcome; the darkness hides what we do not want others to see in us.

And then some think this all religious silliness. After all, a world that has evolved doesn't have a Creator that can become a creature. And men that are evolving are making everything better and advancing anyway.

But know this too: these thoughts don't only come from outside the church, they can slither into the church and creep into our minds as well - before we know it or realize it - and make their home there. And so we need to be on guard.

For we, too, have heard the story before and maybe take it for granted, passing by and over the words without really thinking about them too much.

There is darkness and sin in us we do not want others to see or know, and some we don't even want to repent of, or are afraid to repent of. It is tempting to deny the truth to keep what we want to be true; to hold onto what we love or think we love.

And while we may not think the Word of God silly, do we perhaps act that way? Do we make it the priority it really should be in our lives? Or do we just fit it in when we can, thinking we're doing pretty good on our own, or focused more on what *we* can do more than what *God* can do?

But Christmas, if we take it seriously, shatters all that thinking and sets us straight. ***The Word became flesh*** because there was simply no other way for us to live. For those who turn away from the Light are overcome by the darkness. Those who turn away from the Truth are consumed by the father of lies. Those who think they need no redeeming must save themselves. Yet every grave from Adam's until today is still full. No one has done it yet.

So good news today! Wonderful news, in fact. Hear it again and let it fill you with wonder, like a child's eyes seeing the tree and presents on this day. ***The Word became flesh.***

The world says the gifts you get are because you deserve them, because you've been so good this year. This gift, however, is given to those who do not deserve Him; to those who have not been good, but have sinned, repeatedly and grievously. To a world where there is no naughty list and nice list - only sinners.

For this world, for you and me, ***the Word became flesh.***

For those who take the gifts He has given and either abuse them or throw them away, ***the Word became flesh.***

For those who deny His Word or disregard it, ***the Word became flesh.***

For those who take Him and His grace and mercy for granted, ***the Word became flesh.***

He did not turn His back. He did not give up. He did not take back His promise. Today He comes for you, for one and one reason alone: *because still He loves you.* And He always will.

Unless you understand that, unless you realize our need, you won't get the wonder of Christmas. You won't hear the wonder that fills the words we heard today.

The wonder John is expressing when He says, *Folks! the Word became flesh!* The Infinite became finite. The Uncreated became a creature. The all-powerful One became a helpless baby. Do you realize the glory of God, that He would do this for us?

Iconographers try to depict this wonder by painting icons of Jesus with a gold halo, or nimbus, around His head. And within that halo they put three Greek letters, forming the words: *ho on*, which means: *the one who was*. Meaning that the one who always was, who had no beginning, is now here, enfleshed in this man. So if you want to know God and see God, look no where else but here. For ***the Word who was in the beginning, and was with God and was God,*** is now here. ***The Word became flesh,*** for you!

And we heard that wonder also today from the book of Hebrews, that *in these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son!* Or in other words, the time of the prophets is done. No more messages from angels. Dreams and visions are a thing of the past. The same Word of God that spoke in the beginning and everything came to be is now in the flesh and speaking to us!

Do you get the wonder? Do you know what that means? That Word that spoke and created is speaking and still creating. Creating us anew. Re-creating us. To we who chose death He is speaking life. To us who choose sin He is speaking forgiveness. To us who have turned away He is calling us back. If you've ever got the cold shoulder from someone, or can't get your phone calls, emails, or texts returned, you know how frustrating the silence is. But God is not silent. He is speaking. To you. A Word which does what it says! *Can you believe it?*

And Isaiah is marvelling as well. *The Lord has bared his holy arm!* he says. He has rolled up His sleeves and *bared His holy arm* to get to work. Not against us sinners but for us. And for all people. That *all the ends of the earth see the salvation of our God*. And those feet which bring such good news and peace and joy . . . are the ones now *wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger*. How beautiful those little feet! The feet of God!

Those feet which, as you know, would soon be marred and pierced with nails and fastened to a cross. That creating, life-giving, forgiving voice silenced by those He came to save. And the Word which became flesh laid lifeless in a tomb.

But this is exactly why *the Word became flesh*. This is why Jesus was born - not to be an inspiration for you or an example for you, but to die for you, for your sin.

Which would have been the end of the story and the end of all hope, had this not been true as well: *The Word became flesh . . . and shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it*. The darkness of sin and death and grave, John says, did its worst, raged its hardest, and clamped down with all its strength . . . but could not extinguish the Light. And so the Word that became flesh and died is not overcome, but overcomes. *The Word rises to life again*.

And so, John says - writing to people *after* all this happened, and not just reporting history, but reality - John is saying here: *Folks! This light is still shining in the darkness. This light continues to shine in the darkness*. It didn't just shine in the darkness once and then leave - it is still shining for you. The One born for you, lives for you and lives in you. To wonderfully fill you with His *grace and truth*. To fill you with Himself. To fill you with His life. To fill you with His forgiveness. To fill you with His Spirit. To fill you with His Body and Blood.

And He does. For no longer is He born in a stable, but born *in us* through water and His Word. No longer is He wrapped in swaddling clothes but wraps *us* in His forgiveness. And no longer is He laid in a manger but in our mouths, the bread and wine now His poor and humble manger, as we come to feed on Him. And so He who created all things is creating still, creating in us clean hearts, giving us hope, and providing a life that will never end.

And with such gifts - Christmas gifts! - we can now repent and truly rejoice, but more than that, also give these gifts to others, the ***grace and truth*** filling us also overflowing to others. God using us as His blessing, His gift, to others. Not only saving sinners, but using us in this blessed and blessing way as well. Which truly is adding wonder upon wonder, is it not?

And that wonder starts today as we look into the manger and see in the face of a child, the face of God! Our Saviour.

***For to us a child is born, to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor,
Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*** (Introit Antiphon).

So marvel again, today, at this birth. Not so much *how* it took place, but *that* it did. That God did this *for you*. ***The Word became flesh***. O come let us not only adore Him, but worship Him by receiving His gifts, and then marvel again at the wonders of His love.

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.