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Saint John, Apostle and Evangelist

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Move on from Christmas? Never!”

Text: John 21:20-25; Revelation 1:1-6; 1 John 1:1-2:2

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

**T**he gifts have all been opened. The lights are starting to be turned off. I saw a tree out for the trash already. The music on the radio has gone back to the usual fare. Valentines candy is out in the stores. And all the talk now is on New Years - what celebrations will be taking place, how, and the hope the next year will be better than this year.

The world can't wait for Christmas to get here, but once it does, it moves on quickly to the next thing. Which is too bad.

But not so the Church. And not only because our Christmas celebration lasts for the twelve days of the Christmas season, but because **the Church never moves on from Christmas**. Because *the Word who became flesh*, as we heard and rejoiced in two days ago, still is. And always will be. For the Word of God, the Son of God, didn't just wear our flesh for a while and then cast it off once He was done with it, like a costume or some dirty clothes - He *became* flesh. He *became* this - one of us. This is who Jesus, our Saviour, now is - God and man in one person, united for eternity.

Which is good news for us! That there is hope for us. That our human flesh will live for eternity as well. That as John preached in the reading from Revelation this morning, Jesus is ***the firstborn of the dead*** - not the *only*, but the *first*. The first of many more. Of all who have been ***freed from our sins by his blood***. His blood not only shed on the cross, but born into this world at Christmas.

So while December 25 comes at the **end** of a calendar year, it is the **start** of eternity for us. Jesus' birth into this world for our birth into the next.

**So the Church never moves on from Christmas**. It's simply too important. It's why Luther called the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper *the manger* in which Jesus lies for us today - His Christmas Body and Blood, once dead but now risen, now here for us. But the same Body and Blood. *Do this*, Jesus said, *in remembrance of that, of Me*.

But while **the Church never moves on from Christmas**, we do hear the rest of the story which Christmas begins. We do move onto Epiphany and Lent and Easter - but building on

the story, not leaving anything behind. Not moving onto the next big thing, but unfolding, unpacking the story. And the Apostle and Evangelist John, who we are commemorating today, helps us do that uniquely. He is the only New Testament writer with three kinds of writings for us. **Luke** has two - a Gospel named for him and the history told us in the book of Acts. **Paul** wrote the most letters, or Epistles. But only **John** has a Gospel, three Epistles, and the apocalyptic book of Revelation. So we heard from John three times today - the only time in the Church year that ever happens. And from John we hear many things we would not know had John not included them. There was certainly no shortage of things to write about Jesus' life! As John told us, if one were to write everything Jesus did, *the world itself could not contain the books that would be written*. And we would not have the time to read them all.

So what *is* included, must be important. Must have something to tell us, teach us.

So what to learn today, from the verses we heard from John - especially these verses we heard about the saying that spread among the disciples that John (called here *the disciple whom Jesus loved*) was *not going to die*? What can we possibly learn from an intra-disciple misunderstanding, and perhaps even *jealousy*?

Jealousy, I say, because right before these verses that we heard today, Jesus tells Peter how he was going to die; *by what kind of death he was to glorify God* (John 21:19). That is, how he would be martyred; killed for his preaching Christ. Which, quite frankly, shouldn't have been a surprise. Jesus had told them before that they would be thrown out of the synagogues and killed by those who thought that by such actions they were serving God (John 16:2).

But still, it is a shock to us. To hear of death. Like Peter, we all know we're going to die. But we do not know the when, or the where, or the how. Imagine you were told that - *how* you were going to die, but not the when or the where. Would you like to know that? Or, that you were going to die a martyr's death and so glorify God by your death? Or would you, like Peter, say to Jesus: *Uh, Lord, I'd like to return my gift? I'd like his gift - of not dying! Yes, I think that'd be better for me!*

But as John correctly points out, Jesus didn't say he wasn't going to die. But God has different plans for each of us. He doesn't treat us all the same. Because while He *loves* us all the same, we're all different, and love takes that into account. What's good for you might not be good for me. What I can handle you might not be able to handle. What you need isn't what I need. And so God, in His perfect wisdom and love, doesn't give us all the same things. We don't have *all* the exact same presents under the tree, *all* wrapped exactly the same way, *all* identical! That's not love. That's indifference. That's uncaring. That's . . . *whatever*. And so that's not God. God is never whatever, indifferent, or uncaring. And so to each of us, what is exactly right for us.

To which we might object, like Peter, and say: *not fair!* Which, maybe it's not. Maybe it's better. Better than fair. Maybe it's **good** - like how God created all things in the beginning

before we messed it all up with our sin! Maybe it's **love** - like how God is restoring the creation that we messed up. And still do.

So Jesus treated John differently than Peter. And John and Peter differently than you. And you differently than me. And that's good.

But while there are some gifts that Jesus distributes *differently*, there are some He gives to us *all*. John wants you to know that, too. And chief among those is the forgiveness of sins. He does not withhold that from anyone!

We heard some familiar words about that this morning; words that we use in our liturgy at times. *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*. And then this too: *if anyone does sin, - Anyone!* No limitation on that. Anyone! - *we have an advocate with the Father, - someone who will stand up for us, and stand in for us - Jesus Christ the righteous*. That is, Jesus the Christ, the Word made flesh. *He is the propitiation - the atoning sacrifice - for our sins, and not for ours only - for only a few - but also for the sins of the whole world*. So there is one Christmas gift for all the same. The one we all need.

And so just as **the Church never moves past Christmas**, we never move past this gift either - like we don't need it anymore. John says that too: *If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us*. So if we ever show up one Sunday and say or think: *I didn't sin this week . . .* we're in trouble! It's not a small thing to call God a liar. But the opposite error is just as bad. If we show up and say or think: *I sinned too much this week - there isn't forgiveness for me*. There is. When John said that Jesus *died for the sins of the whole world*, he didn't say: *oh, except you! Except that one!* Whole world means whole world, and each and every one of your sins. No matter how big or how little. That baby in the manger grew up to bear them all on His cross.

Which is why **we don't move on from Christmas** or this gift, but every week the Divine Service begins with the Confession and Absolution, and then most often we sing the song the angels sang at Jesus' birth - the *Gloria in Excelsis!* For the gift we need, is the gift given, and the gift received. That *whenever* we die, *wherever* we die, and *however* we die - whether like Peter, a martyr's death, or like John, after a long life - our flesh will live eternally. The glory of Christmas that the world moves so quickly past will be ours without end.

And with such a gift, John says, we have *something special* here; a **fellowship** here. Which we call the Church. And fellowship means much more than that we simply like each other and hang out together. You may not, in fact, "like" everyone in our church or in the church. But we have this fellowship with each other, in Christ, **that transcends that**. For the word for *fellowship* there is the same word that we say in the Creed for the *communion* of saints, and the *communion* we have here together. It is to be bonded together in a common thing - a common ONE. In Jesus. In His Christmas flesh. That flesh that we're baptized into. That

flesh that we receive in the Lord's Supper. That flesh that gifts us the forgiveness of sins. United to Christ like that unites us to one another in a very special way. That whether I "like" you or not, you are my brother, my sister. And so I will love you like that. I will care for you like that. For I will live with you like that forever. Yet another reason why **the Church does not, can not, move past Christmas.**

For while Christmas happened at a particular moment in time, when *the Word became flesh*, it encompasses *all* of time. For the Word who became flesh is the one, again as John told us today (I told you he says a LOT!), *who is and who was and who is to come*. The **infinite** one in **finite** flesh and blood.

Or, as John also put it: *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands . . .* That is, the one who was *in the beginning*, the Word who was with God and was God, we've now *heard* Him, *seen* Him, and *touched* him! No one ever did that before! But Christmas changed everything. **Now God has flesh and blood**. Which, really, you can't make this up! It's too fantastic. Too wonderful. Yet, John says, it's true. We are the eye witnesses, ear witnesses. And we want you and all the world to know it.

But to know especially this: not to be jealous of us - as perhaps Peter was jealous of the one who didn't have to die a martyr's death like he would! - but rather to know that **you have something even greater**. For while maybe you didn't get to touch Jesus, **He has touched you**. He baptized you and made you His own, His child. He puts His Body and Blood into your mouth to holy you with His forgiveness. He washes you with the blood of His forgiveness. And because He has, **you have life**. A life without end. A gift that neither martyrdom, or old age, or Covid can take away.

So let the world move on from Christmas. We'll keep it. Because our Lord took our flesh and keeps it, *and keeps us*. He's not ashamed of us, or to become one of us. Not at all! Rather, as John tells us, *this is His glory* (John 1:14). And when we see Jesus - whether it's in the manger, in the Jordan, or on the cross - we see the glory of God.

So yes, thank you, we'll keep Christmas. But even better: our Christmas God will keep us. Forever.

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.