

“The Story of Birth... and Death”**Luke 2:1-21**

Tis the season for decorations. It only takes an evening drive to catch a whole lot of Christmas cheer, a peek out the front door to see how neighbors celebrate, a glance around your own home to realize how different it looks from the rest of the year. I can remember the excitement of hiking out in the snow with my dad, finding the right tree, tying it to the car, standing it upright again in the house. As a child I liked the tree most of all decorations (probably because of what would appear underneath it), but over time my favorite decoration has changed. Now it's the nativity. When I walk into a house during this time of year I look around for one, wondering what kind of shelter it is, which animals are present, who will be there. Is the setting a stable or a cave? Is there both a sheep and a donkey? Is there an angel above? Did the shepherds and magi finally arrive? And what about Jesus? This year, my son began critiquing the nativities that already had the baby in the manger, because Jesus wasn't born until Christmas Eve... I admit I'm a bit proud of his fastidious timekeeping! But the great thing about a nativity is that it tells the story—it's grounded in the history that we love to share with each generation. And there's one nativity I'll never forget... or rather, one *viewing* of a nativity I'll never forget. My wife and I were attending a friend's Christmas party and a bunch of us had found the nativity. It was a beautiful set, one like you've probably seen: a real-wood stable with glass-blown figurines. And the baby Jesus held out his arms as if to be picked up by His mother Mary... and then someone behind us said with a snicker, “Oh look, Jesus is ready to be crucified!” It wasn't hard to segregate the reverent from the irreverent after that remark, some bearing a long face, others bearing a smirk. For me, the impiety hung in the air even after we each went back to whatever else it was we were doing before viewing the nativity. But a few days later it struck me: the man who made the quip was really an unwitting prophet! It was meant as a joke at Jesus' expense, but in reality he conveyed a truth: Jesus was born so that He might die; and because He died for the world, He was also born for the world. Just as the unbelieving high priest Caiaphas plotted Jesus' death by saying, “it is better for you that one man should die for the people than the whole nation perish” (Jn 11:50), so this mocking man at a Christmas party somehow fell into the truth. And this truth shouldn't be avoided, even as we celebrate *the birth* of our Savior.

The Son of God didn't become man “just because,” but He became man to fulfill His Father's will to die for the sins of the world. He didn't come into the world for His own interests; if that were the case, He would've simply overthrown all governments and set Himself up as king to be served. Instead, He came meek and mild, a “babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.” Like a Charlie Brown Christmas tree, His appearance wasn't very impressive, but through the cross He fulfilled His Father's will and made known His true glory (Jn 12:23-24). And He didn't come into the world merely to show He was right, like some divine “I told you so”; if that were the case, He would've simply reminded you of all the laws you've broken and left it at that. Instead, He came forgiving, so that there might be “on earth peace, good will toward men.” Our church father Athanasius (299-373)—after whom one of our three ancient creeds is named—put it this way: “our own cause was the occasion of his descent... our own transgression evoked [his] love for human beings” (*On the Incarnation* 4). Jesus saw your sin and He had to come... not to punish you, but to *be punished for you*. The Son of God became

man and died, and this is why you celebrate tonight! That little baby in the nativity came to fulfill the will of His Father by dying on a cross for your redemption so that you might have eternal life in Him! It's exactly what you sang in the opening hymn, "Should we fear our God's displeasure, Who to save, Freely gave, His most precious treasure? To redeem us He has given, His own Son, From the throne, Of His might in heaven" (LSB 360:3). And you confess this in faith given by the Holy Spirit through the hearing of the story—not just the story of His birth, but (even as the mocking man at the Christmas party knew) the story of His death. This wasn't lost on Luke who wrote our gospel reading for tonight. He knew why Jesus came and so he recorded for each generation both the birth and the death of the Son of God. Luke was a great writer, and with great skill he ties these two together, for at His birth Jesus was "wrapped in swaddling clothes [and] laid in a manger; because there was no room in the inn," while at His death Jesus was "wrapped in linen, and laid in a tomb... where no man before was laid" (Lk 23:53). The birth and death of God's Son cannot be separated because they both took place for the same reason: for *your* spiritual rebirth and eternal life *beyond* death! They took place because "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son" (Jn 3:16).

And only this year it dawned on me how perfect it is that the Son of God came to earth as a baby, like every one of us. We marvel at almighty God becoming so weak and fragile in His humiliation, even being dependent on His mother Mary... but now think about who the nativity story appeals to. Because my two-year old daughter couldn't care less about a picture of adults... but you put a picture of a baby in front of her and she goes bonkers: "Baby, baby, baby"... I can't get her to be quiet! Even those who've just transitioned from being a baby are obsessed with a baby. They don't need to know a name or a relationship or a status; they're just excited to know that someone else is a baby like they were! It's a story they can relate to, which is why the Son of God came "born of the virgin Mary." To cite Athanasius one last time, "Being human, [you] will be able to know the Father more speedily and directly by a body corresponding [to yours]... considering that the things done by him are not human but the works of God" (*On the Incarnation* 43). I dare say his idea of knowing the Father "more speedily" is made manifest no better place than in the faith of the youngest child, for whom Jesus was born and died. That's why we love Christmas: because we share the story with each generation, and even children are enthralled by the story of a baby named "Jesus," "so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb," for "he shall save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). Jesus was born and Jesus died, and in these historical truths you have eternal life! All glory be to the child born in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago, amen.

—Pastor Greg Bauch