

Let All Together Praise Our God!

(John 1:14) ¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

In Christ Jesus, who was born to be the God-man, dear fellow redeemed,

Many communities in our country have a favorite son, someone who grew up to become someone famous, maybe a movie star or sports legend, or even president of the United States. And in the case of the latter, when that favorite son happens to be a president, the community is sure to make a big deal about it. If possible, they showcase the man's birthplace and turn his childhood home into a national landmark, a place that people can visit and tour. We Christians can certainly appreciate the sentiment.

In fact, I suppose you could say that today we are celebrating our favorite son, who happens to be THE SON OF GOD—born this day in the City of David. He is Christ the Lord. This morning we journey in spirit to the place of his birth. We tour the stable in which he was born and peer into his manger bed. Most importantly we pause to marvel at who he is and what he grew up to accomplish, not just for us, but for all people of all time. With this in mind, we will borrow for our theme this morning, the title of the hymn we just sang: Let All Together Praise our God! 1) who veiled in flesh his power divine; and 2) who makes his glory yours and mine.

St. John is quick to point out that our favorite son is none other than our Eternal God and Creator. In the opening words of his gospel John writes: **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”** (John 1:1-3). I really don't know how to make sense of everything that the inspired writer is telling us, other than to say that Jesus is the “Let there be...” of creation. He's the living Word who spoke light and land, seas and sky and everything else into existence. He wasn't just there as a witness. He was the instrument of creation. He summoned all things, including humanity itself, into being. He's the Word who gives light and life.

Jesus is truly, fully divine – he always has been and always will be. John goes on to tell us: **“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us...”** (John 1:14). Just like that, there came a moment in time, we call it Christmas, when our Eternal God came to earth in flesh and blood. Or as we just sang: “He veils in flesh his power divine.” (CW 355:3). “Veils in flesh...” – think of a bride on her wedding day. While you can make out some of her features through the veil she wears, she waits to reveal the full measure of her beauty until just the right moment in time. So it is with Jesus. By becoming human, he doesn't give up even the tiniest speck of his divine nature and power. But he does cover it with human flesh, waiting to reveal, in bits and pieces, the beauty of his divinity in ways and at times that suit his saving plan and purpose.

Of course, there is a great mystery at play. Just exactly how does the eternal God step into time? He doesn't choose to answer that question, most likely because we couldn't understand the explanation. But he does speak to the “why” of it all. Why did he come? To make “...his dwelling among us.” Throughout the history of his Old Testament Church, God chose to dwell among his people, first in the portable tent-like structure called the Tabernacle, and later, in Solomon's Temple. God's divine presence would, at times, fill his holy house in the form of a fiery cloud. The people, sinners all, would know to keep their distance. The smell of burnt animal flesh and the sight of all the blood that flowed from all the animals sacrificed as sin and guilt offerings were reminders enough, that until a better sacrifice appeared, God must be worshiped from afar.

And then it happened. Christmas happened. That better sacrifice arrived! God came, not in a pillar of fire or in the cloud, but in the flesh – human flesh. He came not as a grown man, flexing gigantic muscles and shouting loud commands. He came as a helpless infant, cooing and crying like all infants do. He came not as a scientist carrying out some grand experiment, or a sight seer, curious to see how the other half lives. No, he made his home among us because it was the only way, the only way we could one day have a home with him in heaven.

With this one saving goal in mind, he got right to work. Really? As an infant? Oh yes! He went to work from the moment he drew his first breath and even before. But what could a baby do for us? Because of who he is and here he came from, he could live the life before God that we were created to live—the perfect life, the one our first parents forfeited on behalf of all humanity when they questioned God’s wisdom and defied his will. No longer capable of passing along to us the image of God they had lost, they left their sin to us instead. We inherited their sin, not as some recessive trait, but as the dominant, in fact, the only force at work in our lives. Sin was in total control of us, and because of it, we couldn’t produce so much as an ounce of the holiness we needed to stand before God our Judge. Our sin would bring about our eternal destruction.

Since our sin makes us detestable in God’s eyes, you might expect that he would delight in seeing us get our just deserts. But it just isn’t true. Rather, God assures us: **“I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked...” (Ezekiel 33:11)**. That wasn’t just a nice sentiment on his part. He backed and packed those words with action! In love beyond all comprehension, God determined to do for us what we can’t do for ourselves. He put on our flesh in order to become one of us, one with us for the purpose of serving as our Substitute, that is, the Substitute of every human being ever born. Because sin ruins the human condition from the moment of conception, he served as our Substitute already in the womb. While we can easily and rightfully get lost in the wonder of his Bethlehem birth, this Christmas morning, as we gaze into the Savior’s crude crib, see him as he is, your Stand-in before God – your “do over” in the flesh! He was the perfect baby in your place. And then, he was the perfect toddler, child, teenager, and adult—and all for you. He threw no selfish tantrums. He never sassied his parents. He never disobeyed them or anyone else. He never made fun of a sibling or friend. He never cheated on a test or broke any law. He never spoke a cross word or entertained a sinful thought. He was perfect and always in a perfectly humble way. All this he was for you.

He did all of this in your name and infinitely more. For although he was perfect in every way, the world into which he was born, was sin-scarred and cruel. He faced sin everywhere. He saw up close and personal how sin spoiled family relationships. He witnessed the anger it produces, the greed it works, the hurt it causes, and the guilt it brings. He witnessed firsthand sin’s horrible effects on the beautiful world he had created. He saw people who were diseased and disabled. He experienced the sting of death as he stood at the gravesides of those he loved and cared for.

You might expect that someone so perfect would be so disgusted by sin and its awful effects that he’d head back to heaven at the drop of hat. But since doing so would be of no help to us, he stayed, and again, as our Substitute, he dealt with all sin’s consequences perfectly on our behalf. As you read the gospels, you see the great compassion that Jesus had for sinners, including those who plotted and sinned against him. He forgave, he cautioned, he helped, he healed, he even raised the dead. To put it simply, he loved with a perfectly selfless love, and to show you just how selfless, he gives you all the credit for all this love. This is God’s Christmas gift to you! In the person of his Son, born in the flesh, God gives you the perfection you need to be his child and live in his heaven! But that’s only half of God’s saving equation. Recall the words we sang of Jesus in our last hymn: *“He serves that I a lord may be—a great exchange indeed! Could Jesus’ love do more for me to help me in my need?”*

The amazing answer to that question is, “YES!” Jesus could do more! He did do more. In fact, he hasn’t stopped working on our behalf. So we again are moved to say with the hymn writer: Let All Together Praise Our God who makes his glory yours and mine.

Jesus veiled in flesh his power divine not only to live in our place, but also to offer up that holy life on our behalf. Human sin requires that a human pay sin's wages. **The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23)**—not the death of a lamb, or goat, or oxen, or dove, but a human death? Which humans should die for sin? God answers that question through the Prophet Ezekiel: **“The soul that sins is the one who will die.” (Ezekiel 18:4)**. And since the Bible clearly states that **“All have sinned” (Romans 3:23)**, it can only mean that all must die—eternally as in forever separated from God. He in heaven; sinners in hell.

But what if a fellow human being were kind enough to offer his life as our sin-payment? That would be quite a gesture, but if that individual were a sinner like us, his best intentions would come to nothing. The psalmist explains: **“No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him—⁸ the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough.” (Psalm 49:7-8)**. Do you follow what the psalm writer is saying? A fellow sinner's death would be human enough, but since he has his own sin to atone for, he has nothing left to pay for yours, let alone the sins of the whole world.

But now look at Jesus, who in his grace was willing to offer his life for yours. He's the perfect Redeemer! He's God in the flesh, who by reason of his humanity is one of us, and yet had no sin of his own. That made Jesus the one and only sacrifice acceptable to God, and not for you alone. For by reason of his divinity he was both willing and able to claim as his own, not just your sin, but the sins of the whole world. And that's exactly what he did! He, the God-man, suffered in hell, the death of each and every sinner, canceling all sin-debt, and then he broke the bonds of death, rising the grave to prove that sin's curse has been done away with once and for all.

The living Word of God who spoke life into the human race at the creation of world, spoke new life to us dead sinners when he said from the cross: **“It is finished.” (John 19:30)**. With this powerful promise, Jesus has worked faith in our hearts and made us heirs of his kingdom. This is the glory that John and the apostles witnessed—the glory of God who is so loving that he was willing to die for us and so powerful that he was able to take his life up again and share it with all of us. This is indeed Someone to celebrate.

The world celebrates its favorite sons by visiting their birthplaces and touring their childhood homes. It's not unusual for Christians to do the same when it comes to celebrating Jesus. Each year many Christians travel to the Holy Land to see where Jesus lived and died and rose again. But whether we ever get to make that trip or not, all of us can rejoice in the fact that Jesus comes to us and makes our hearts his home. He does this through the power of his Word and Sacrament. This very day, Jesus' birthday, as we celebrate his Holy Supper, he again makes his saving glory ours as he places on our lips the very body and blood that secured our peace with God here on earth and forever in heaven. Our Hymn of the Day captures this thought so beautifully in the stanza that reads: “He (Christ) undertakes a great exchange, puts on our human frame, and in return gives us his realm, his glory and his name.” It's all ours, dear Christians! May this truth fill your hearts with Christmas joy, today and always, for Jesus' sake. Amen.