

This is a very special night (day). We are celebrating the birth of a man called Jesus, a man that lived some two thousand years ago, but we are not certain exactly when, or even where he was born. His life was cut short; he lived about thirty-three years, but we are not really sure how old he was at his death. In short, there is much that we do not know about the historical Jesus, in spite of the Gospel witness. But we do know that Jesus changed the world. He is, without any question, the most significant person in human history. We are gathered here, as a worshiping community, because of Jesus. For believers, this is his birthday. The Christian Church did not originally celebrate Jesus' birth, in any special way. Even so, by about the four hundredth year following his birth, the Feast of the Nativity, the celebration of Christmas, was almost universal. Not really knowing when he was born, the Church picked a date, selected a date to replace a pagan festival, the *Sol Invictus* festival of ancient Rome. The date selected was December 25, the day of the winter solstice on the calendar established by Julius Caesar.

We have two biblical accounts of the birth of Jesus. They are largely legend, fixed in writing by two different authors who could not have known each other. One author was a man known to the Christian Church as Luke; he was a Greek physician. The other Gospel was written by a man known to us as Matthew, but that is clearly a pen name. Most biblical scholars agree that we don't know who the author of Matthew really was. We do know that it was not our Lord's disciple, Saint Matthew. Neither Luke nor the author of Matthew's Gospel, by near consensus among biblical scholars, was an eyewitness to the life and ministry of Jesus. They based their stories on oral tradition and on an earlier Gospel, Mark's Gospel, which contains no account of Jesus' birth, so their birth accounts were formed from oral story and emerging myth. There are some important and significant variations between the two counts that only the naïve attempt to reconcile.

I tell you all of this is in order for you to understand that the accounts that we have about our Lord's birth are very human attempts to understand something that is beyond the grasp of history and something that is beyond the grasp of human logic. With Christmas, we journey into the realm of faith, which is perfectly fine, because there is no way to approach God but by faith. Faith emerges from the hope for salvation, and faith finds definition the experience of God.

For the two thousand some odd years of Christian history, people have come to know God and experience God's love through the man we call Jesus. In Jesus, we find the perfect revelation of God, to the point that we observe, in faith, that Jesus is the Son of the Living God, that he is, to use a theological construct, the Incarnate Word of God. He is the Word by which God created, when God said, "Let it be!" and it was. In faith, we believe that the creating power of God became, in a mysterious way, human, by the work of Spirit of God. By faith we believe that God lived among us as Jesus Christ. We believe, by faith, that Jesus taught us how to walk in the way of God, so that we could be considered righteous by God. In faith, we believe that when we failed to walk that righteous walk and talk that righteous talk, God's Incarnate Son died for us that we might be made righteous, not by our works, but by his love. I think that we can honestly say that in Jesus Christ God embraced his creation and that through our trust and our faith in Jesus, we gain God's loving blessing and are made a redeemed people, made holy by the grace of God's love.

John's Gospel tells us that the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. John's Gospel also tells us, that God sent his Son, the Incarnate Word, into this world because he loves us. John tells us that purpose of God's act, in sending his Son was to save sinners. All the Gospels tell us Jesus took our sins to the Cross and washed our souls clean with his sacred blood. Because of this,

we are God's people. Because of this, we are the sheep of his pasture. Because of this, he does restore our souls.

Is it any wonder that we want to celebrate, as a most holy day, the moment in history when God became man? So we gather, as a people redeemed, and celebrate in song and word the birth of the Messiah. We gather to commemorate this birth with the ancient rite of the Eucharist, through which he becomes present to us in his most holy Body and Blood, in the form of bread and wine. We gather to listen, once again, to the old, old story of our Savior's birth, hearing once, again, how Mary gave birth to her child, and laid him in an animal's manger, because there was no room for him in the inn. We imagine, in our minds, the shepherds, watching over their sheep and goat flocks, during the clear, cold night. We imagine the brilliant stars in God's Heaven. The theater of our mind takes us to that moment when to quote from St. Luke, "an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

"The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." The ancient story, the ancient legend still stirs us. God's grace and love still ride that wave of the words we call the "Christmas Story," drawing us ever closer to the breast of God. The ancient story itself reaches out with the arms of God to embrace us with his love, giving us God's peace, God's mercy, God's perfect love, because Jesus Christ is born. *Amen.*