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**Sermon for the
Nativity of Our Lord
Titus 2:11-15 & St. Luke 2:1-14**

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December 24, 2012 — Christmas

On each of the last four Sundays, as we've prepared for Christmas by walking through the season of Advent, the children have gathered at the Advent wreath and we've lit the candles one by one as reminders that when the eternal Son of God was born into the world as one of us, he brought to us poor sinners hope and peace and joy and love. He who is light eternal brought his light into the darkness and, as the Gospel for Christmas Day reminds us: the darkness has not overcome it. We're reminded of his eternal light as we light the Christ Candle this evening. True hope, true peace, true joy, and true love are found *only* in Jesus because only in him do we find the true Truth and only in him do we find what is truly eternal and lasting.

And yet we have to ask: How? How is it that this baby we celebrate being born in a stable two millennia ago, how does he bring us these things? We declare the Good News of the Gospel message: believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be baptised—have faith in him—and be saved; but how is that possible? How can Jesus offer himself for the forgiveness of our sins when no one else can? This is the focus of our lessons this evening: the person of Jesus Christ, what he has done for us, and how we ought to respond.

Think of the words of the Nicene Creed that we recited just a moment ago:

I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.

These were words, carefully chosen, and theological concepts carefully hammered out by the bishops and leading theologians of the Church over the course of the Fourth Century. There were disagreements over the very person of Christ: who and what he was. And our fathers in the faith understood that if we don't get Christ right—if we fail to understand who and what he is—we'll never get Christianity—get the faith—right. We still struggle with this problem today. Every cult and every heresy has at its root some misunderstanding or some wrong doctrine of either the nature of the Trinity or the nature and person of Jesus. Christianity is different from every other religion in the world. Every other religion teaches that we overcome our sin or find reunion with God through our own works. Only Christianity teaches that we find restoration with God and forgiveness for our sins in the works of another—in the work of Jesus. And so at the root of the religion of Jesus Christ is faith, not works. And if the root is faith—and even more importantly, if it's not our faith that saves, but the object of our faith—

then our eternal security rests on us putting our faith in the right object. Most of you will remember some time ago I placed a box here next to the pulpit. It was big and it looked solid, but there was nothing inside. I sat on it and it collapsed. The Church Father understood that faith is a bit like sitting on that box. I can have all the faith in the world that an object like that empty box will support my weight, but if the box—if the object of my faith—simply isn't capable, I'm going to end up on the floor. My faith doesn't keep me from falling—the *object* of my faith does that, and only if it's capable of supporting me. So with Jesus. The real Jesus, the one the Scriptures tell us about, is capable of taking away our sins if we have faith and trust him to do so. But there are all sorts of false Christ's out there too. We can trust all we want in them, but they simply aren't capable of dealing with our problem. Trust in them and on the Last Day, as we stand before the Great Judge, the box in which we've trusted collapses.

And so the Christmas lessons remind us—as the Creed does—that this Baby in the Manger who has come to be the Saviour of the world—isn't just another human being; he is God in human flesh. He is God of God, Light of Light, True God of True God. He was eternally begotten of the Father. He was there at the Creation of the cosmos. He is the Word of God; by him the Father created all things. As St. John says in tomorrow's Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any

thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men....And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. (John 1:1-4, 14)

And this is why Jesus is worthy of our faith and why he is able to take away our sins: he is God. If Jesus were anything less than God himself he would lack the perfection necessary to be that one full, perfect, and sufficient, sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.

But the flip side of this is that to redeem us from our sins, Jesus has to be just as human as he is divine. And that's the focus of our Gospel—of the well-known Christmas story told by St. Luke of Joseph and Mary in that stable in Bethlehem, of the little baby born and placed in a feeding trough, and of the shepherds sent by angels to adore the one who had come in fulfilment of God's promises. Jesus was "born of the Virgin Mary". Born of woman, he became one of us. As St. Augustine said so well 1500 years ago: "The Son of God was made man in order that men might become the children of God." He humbled himself and took our nature upon his divinity, becoming God Incarnate, both divine and human so that he could stand in our place and at the cross take the punishment we deserved for our sins. Just as he could never be our Saviour were he not fully God, he could not be our Saviour if he were not one of us—not fully human.

Christmas is the celebration of the Incarnation of the eternal Son of God—incarnate for our sake, in fulfilment of all God's Old Covenant promises, that our sins

might be forgiven, and that we might experience true hope, true peace, true joy, and true love.

And yet the Christmas liturgy reminds us that Jesus is more than an historical fact—more than a dusty figure of history. Jesus is more than a ceramic baby in a miniature stable. He is here today and always with us. One of the names of Jesus in Hebrew is "Immanuel". Do you know what that means? It means "God with us". God was certainly with humanity during those thirty-odd years that Jesus walked the earth, but he *continues* to be with us. We come to his Table tonight and to the feast that he has prepared and in which he offers his own self to his people. We who have been baptised into him—into his body, the Church—and who, through our baptism are united with him and receive our very spiritual life from him, come to eat the bread and wine: signs and seals of his body broken for us, his blood poured out for us. In our baptism he unites us to his body and at his Table he feeds us and fills us with the life of grace.

And yet our lessons don't let us stop with the head-knowledge of who Jesus is and what he has done for us. Our Epistle calls us to *live* out this knowledge—to put it into *action*. St. Paul writes to Titus:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus

Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. (Titus 2:11-14)

Jesus calls us out of the world's darkness and into the light. The salvation he offers isn't just fire insurance; it's not a "Get Out of Hell Free" card. He doesn't just save us from the guilt and consequences of our sins; *he saves us from sin itself*. He puts his own life—his own self—in us and calls us to live as new people—to live as him. His Holy Spirit teaches us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, to live with self-controlled and godly lives, as we live in this in-between time and await his return. He gives us hope, peace, joy, and love—things the world is lacking in its darkness—but he doesn't give them to us so that we can hoard them and keep them to ourselves or even keep them within the Church. He calls us to take that his hope, his peace, his joy, and his love out into the world's darkness. As we come to the manager this Christmas, remember that Jesus has brought us salvation, so that we might take his salvation to the world.

Let us pray: "Almighty God, you make us glad with the yearly remembrance of the birth of your Son Jesus Christ; Grant that, as we joyfully receive him as our redeemer, we may with sure confidence behold him when he shall come to be our judge; who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*"