

The Nativity of our Lord: Christmas Eve 2005 (rev. from 2002)

Text: Luke 2:1-20

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Grace and Peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ

All people of all times, places, and cultures have been looking for something. This something they've been looking for is more universal than riches, or power, or even happiness. All people, of all times, places and cultures have been and are looking for God. St. Paul recognized this and in his first sermon in the city of Athens he proclaimed why it was so: "From one man God made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that people would seek him and perhaps reach out for him" (Acts 17:26-27). So God has planted in the heart of all people the desire to seek him, to want him, to dream of him – and dreamed they have. Cultures in many different lands and times have dreamt the dream of being close to God, of knowing him like a brother.

So in India they talk of Krishna – a God who became a man so that he might lead people to a higher life.

So in Egypt they told stories about Osiris – a God who died to help people and then rose again.

So in Greece and Rome they dreamt about Dionysios and Bacchus – a God who renewed the earth each year with his death and resurrection.

So in Phrygia they spoke of Attis – again a God become a man to save humans from their ignorance and miserable existence.

In all of these cultures, and dozens more, the people who told these stories, who believed these myths, were getting at one central desire: to know God, to befriend him, to love him, and more importantly, to be loved by him. You see, God can seem very, very far off. You know this if you are celebrating this Christmas as the first Christmas without a recently departed loved one. So who wouldn't want to hear a story about how God loves us so much that he became one of us to help us? It's a comforting story indeed.

And so we Christians are gathered here this Christmas Eve to celebrate our God becoming a human being to save us. As I said, several cultures in several different centuries have had this dream. Is our celebration just another dream, just another myth about a God who really cares? Should Christianity just line up with those other dreamy religions and admit that all it can do

is tell stories about what it would like to be true? Why not celebrate not only Christ but Krishna and Osiris as well? More presents that way, you know. Is there any difference between our story of God becoming a man and the story of all those other cultures and religions who wanted to know God?

Yes my friends there is a difference, and that difference is found in the first few verses of today's Gospel lesson. Listen again to some of the most important words in all the Scriptures: "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria." This is no way to start a myth or a dream – it's how you start a history book. And therein lies the difference between Christmas and all the dreams and myths of people who desired to know God. The stories of Krishna, Osiris, Dionysos, and all those other god-become-a-man-myths are just that, myths. They all start in the misty past: "Long ago in a galaxy far, far away. . ." or "Once upon a time. . ." or "When the world was young. . ." These are how all these myths of gods become men begin, but this Christian "myth" of God become a man has a very odd beginning if it was meant to be a myth: In those days Caesar Augustus. . . That's no way to start a story about something that you don't mean to be factual because, you see, Augustus was a very real person that we happen to know a great deal about. We know his birthday (23 Sept 63 BC), we know his uncle (Julius Caesar), we know when he became emperor of Rome and a host of other facts about his reign. And St. Luke, by starting his story about Jesus' birth with the name of Caesar Augustus is doing something very deliberate and very striking.

Luke was no dummy. He knew that what he was about to write about Jesus of Nazareth was, well, pretty amazing. He knew that if he wasn't careful people would just think he was telling another story, another myth, about the god who comes to be a man. But no! This was not another story, this was history and so Luke starts off with this very specific historical reference. He's saying to us: I know this story sounds pretty crazy, but it's true! Don't believe me? Check my facts, it all started when Caesar Augustus ruled in Rome and Quirinius was governor of Syria. . .

No my friends, Christmas is not myth. It is fact. Or, as one Christian writer has put it – is is Myth Become Fact. Christmas is that same old dream that God put in the heart of humanity – the dream that God would love us in spite of our sin. But it is a dream come true - as true as the fact that there was a Roman Emperor named Augustus, so Jesus Christ is God himself become a human being to save us from our sins. The myth of the god who

comes to save has become the fact of Jesus Christ – the one true God become a real human being who really lived, died, rose again, and ascended into heaven.

This is Christmas. It is not Santa Claus and gifts and Nat King Cole singing the "Christmas Song" endlessly on the radio (thank goodness that is almost over). Nor is Christmas even about a sort of generic "peace on earth." Christmas is about the one gift that all humankind has longed for: the very specific peace on earth of the one true God coming to save all people from their sin. It was that sin that had long separated people from God. It was that sin, that rebellion, that thumb in the eye of God that had made it impossible for the people of the world to do anything but dream about a god who would love them. They had no way to get to God. Our relationship with him was broken – and it was not in our power to fix it. Our brokenness is shown in that we can't even have one day without bickering and back stabbing. Even our Christmas celebrations are soon marred with kids fighting over toys and adults gossiping about this or that family member. So let us repent. Let us turn away from our brokenness and our dreams of making our own way to God. Let us repent and turn toward Christ for now we no longer have to dream, because God has taken the initiative and made the dream, and more than the dream, come true. Humankind no longer has to hold on to myths, because God has fulfilled and burst all those myths by becoming a fact. Jesus of Nazareth, born of the Virgin Mary, God's Son and Mary's Son, True God and True Human, has come. He lived the perfect life we owed God. He died the death we deserved to die when he was crucified. And he rose again from the dead to promise eternal life to all who trust in him. And this story is as real as the newspaper headlines you read everyday. It's as real as the Roman Empire. It's as real as wood formed into a cross and cold iron nails and blood and death and a heavy solid stone rolled away on that Sunday morning when the man who was and is God rose again from the dead for our salvation.

This is Christmas: rock solid reality, the only one there is.

We are here tonight to celebrate this reality in the Supper of our Lord's true and real Body and Blood. For Christmas is a time of gift-giving for a reason. The Father has given us the gift of our Lord Jesus Christ, God in the flesh. And we receive him this night in his Body and Blood for the forgiveness of our sins. Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Amen.

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 will keep

your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.