

## **THE SON WHO IS THE SAVIOR**

Hear the Word of God for this Eve of the Nativity, with our hearts centered by the following freshly translated verse:

*She will give birth (to a) Son, and you will call His Name, Jesus: for He will save His people from their sins.<sup>1</sup>*

**Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**

This evening is given for us to recall prophecy and its fulfillment. It has a parallel on another night in the Church Year, before another High Feast. When the Feast of the Nativity came into the calendar about three centuries after the Feast of the Resurrection, there was certainly a thought that one cannot celebrate the Birth of the Christ without remembering His Death and Resurrection. In time, when the end of the 19th century neared, there was given to the Church in England a service of Lessons and Carols. This service, as does the Holy Saturday service of Light and Readings, reminds the Church of God's promises and His fulfilling them for His people.

This evening, through the hymns and readings of the Church, God the Holy Spirit has once again reminded us of the Christ through His Word. From the Promise of the Savior given by God that our first parents might be saved from sin by His grace through Faith, to the record of God's Word becoming flesh and dwelling among His people, God's Word has reminded us that God fulfills His promises, in His time, according to His ways. To support that proclamation, from the opening strains of tonight's processional hymn until the tones of the recessional carol fade away, our voices in symphony also declare God's promises and faithfulness in sending His Savior.

What we are not to forget, amid all the color, grandeur, music, song and wonders of this night, is that God's promise to send the Savior for all mankind was completed by Him on a Cross. In this place this night, reality was emphasized as an icon of God's saving moment was moved from the entrance to the Nave, through the same into the Chancel, to stand in the Sanctuary. The new processional crucifix is used, as were

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 1: 21.

the old crosses here from time-to-time, to remind us that Jesus is present with His people through God's chosen means of grace. The movable crucifix visually shows us that He Whose birth the Church celebrates this night across the globe is even now present among us through His Word.

To help you keep that truth in your hearts this evening, the crucifix moved through your midst, as you showed respect to God for His Presence among us. As it did so, God's Word came from your lips in song, declaring that Jesus is the God and Lord of all who came down from heaven to earth. The crucifer carried the image of God's victory over sin, death and hell past the font. As he did so, we were to be reminded that all who are baptized have participated in the death and resurrection of Christ. We have been washed in the blood of Jesus through the water and Word.

The image of the living God's triumph passed then through the Chancel rails. This symbolizes for us Jesus' entrance into the Most Holy Place on earth. Then, long ago He bore His own blood to pour out as the final sacrifice for sin – your sin and the sins of the whole world. Finally, that representation of the Divine Reason the Word became flesh, was born of the Virgin and named Jesus, came to rest next to the Table of the Lord.

There, God's Word in print resides this evening. There, Jesus' true Body and Blood come with His Word later this night and in the morning. Jesus – in, with and under bread and wine – will be distributed to believing sinners for forgiveness and strengthening to life everlasting. All of that and more has been declared to you tonight to help you own this eternal truth:

*She will give birth (to a) Son, and you will call His Name, Jesus:  
for He will save His people from their sins.<sup>2</sup>*

That last phrase appears to be a paraphrase, recorded in St. Matthew's Gospel, of a much more ancient text.<sup>3</sup> For centuries before those words were first spoken, God's people in the Faith had been waiting, chanting, singing and remembering

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 1: 21.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 130:8.

their sins and God's promise to buy them back from lawlessness. This was done through such words as Matthew records of the angel's message to Joseph. In fact, it is the entire word of God you have before you tonight – the inspired Word through faithful translations; the illumined word through faithful verse; and the enlightened Word through proclamation – the whole counsel of God has come to you revealing His Savior for His people. This all is given that you might hear, believe and respond in the Faith to everything God is doing for you.

Now, you might have come here tonight because of family tradition: you don't want to disappoint parents or grandparents, spouse, siblings or friends. Or, you may have entered this ship of God tonight because, after all, it is Christmas Eve and you thought that one ought to at least see what all the fuss is about. It is possible that you are here because it is the expected thing to do, even though you may not believe most of the things you sing here tonight. Take heart, God can, and does, work through such sinful thoughts to get you to His truth.

On the other hand, many of you are here because you know the evening's narrative. You trust in the Word of God. You believe that God has called you and gathered you into this place that He might give you His gifts. You expect to be confronted with the reality that sin – that is all breaking in thought, deed and word, of all things done and undone apart from God's Holy Word – that sin permeates this whole fallen creation, including your natural heart, mind and soul. You know you need to hear that there is nothing you can do in yourself to fix that terrible condition.

If that describes you, then you are here because you yearn, with open ears, for the Truth that God has done all that is necessary to save you from all your sins. You desire to hear that you are saved from this sinful world and from the author of sin, the serpent of old. God called you to this service that He might serve you His eternal Truth. That Word all humans have been called to believe. God has come into the world, in our flesh, to save us, to save you, from your sins. All of that began, in the fifth lesson for this evening, with God-breathed words translated like this:

*And of Jesus Christ, the birth thus it was: betrothed (was) His mother, Mary, to Joseph; before they came together, He was found in (her) womb having (His Source) from (the) Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup>*

There is a lot of historical reality packed into that long sentence. First, we are given the Son's Name. That sets the emphasis of the section: it is about Jesus, the Christ. That means that He is the Messiah, the Anointed one of God, the fulfillment of God's promise given to Eve in our first reading of the night.

Second, the narrative indicates that Jesus was born. He had a human mother, though no human biological father. St. Matthew makes it very clear that Mary and Joseph had not consummated their betrothal.

History records that, over 2,000 years ago, Israelite engagements were undertaken about a year before the marriages were sealed. The brides would remain with their families until the wedding night. Then they would be taken into their groom's homes. Ancient Israelite betrothals were so binding that they could only be broken by a bill of divorce.

In ancient times, a bride who permitted herself to get pregnant before the marriage night could be legally stoned to death. A man who impregnated a betrothed woman without her consent would be, according to God's Law, stoned to death. The Gospel text is setting us as hearers up for some shocking news – at least to the devout Jews of the first century AD.

Those faithful people of old were not like the generations living among us. We live in a society wherein couples cohabit, in direct violation of the sixth commandment. Then, whenever the "time is right," they may get married. That can often be after children are way past infancy. (If you have sinned such a sin, know that Jesus came into our flesh to die to bring you forgiveness. Turn from your sins. In the Faith: you are free to walk in new life). Now, in forgiveness, turn your thoughts back to the revelation of the generation of Jesus. Remember, our text declares:

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 1:18.

*And of Jesus Christ, the birth thus it was: betrothed (was) His mother, Mary, to Joseph; before they came together, He was found in (her) womb having (His Source) from (the) Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup>*

A third point is to be made tonight from the opening words of Matthew: Jesus had a divine generation. He was formed in the womb of the Virgin through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, the life-giver. No man, human or divine, was involved in Jesus' conception in His mother's womb. Our narrative of Jesus' birth continues as Joseph, Mary's betrothed husband, pondered her pregnancy, one in which he knew he had no part:

*Joseph, her husband, being righteous, and not willing to expose her, was minded to put her away in quietness.<sup>6</sup>*

The man whom God had chosen to be the human authority under the Fourth Commandment over Jesus displayed his justness. He knew that to expose Mary's pregnant state was to have her stoned to death. The Scripture calls Joseph a just man. That means that he was not only a "stand-up guy," he was a Torah believing, (we would say, "Bible believing"), man who was faithful in keeping God's Word. Yet, he showed that his righteousness was not self-righteousness (as is yours and mine from time to time).

Joseph was thinking in terms of God's justice. That is, Joseph, following God's example towards sinners, determined to show mercy. He would not marry the woman whom he thought to be unfaithful. He wanted her to live, and perhaps be forgiven her sin.

Apart from God's intervention, Joseph would have made the wrong mercy choice. He had chosen life for Mary and the Baby. Yet this was not the Life our Lord intended for them. Our text continues, as God through His messenger speaks:

*Joseph, son of David-  
You may not fear to take to yourself Mary for your wife;  
for the One in her begotten from (the) Spirit remains Holy.*

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 1:18.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 1:19.

*And she will birth (a) Son, and you will call His Name, Jesus:  
for He will save His people from their sins.<sup>7</sup>*

There the Savior was declared to Joseph. He has been thus proclaimed to you. The reason He became incarnate is even in that text: to save His people, to save you, from your sins. Through God's angelically delivered Word in a dream, the Holy Spirit now is working in you. This goes into your ears, deep into your hearts: Your Savior is born!

You call His Name Jesus, for He is your Savior from sin. All the prophecies about God's Means of deliverance from sin, death and hell are summed up in Jesus. St. Matthew declares God's fulfilling His Word. The evangelist is big on that. In at least 11 sections in his Good News book, Matthew declares that the Lord's sayings from ancient times are fulfilled in Jesus.<sup>8</sup> Tonight the first of those Matthew declares completed is this one from quoted Isaiah's Good News:

*"Behold, the Virgin in (her) womb will be (with Child), and she will birth (a) Son. Then, they will call the Name of Him, Emmanuel," the one translated, "God with us."<sup>9</sup>*

How have you received those words of truth? Do you have your doubts?

Well, Joseph also doubted. But, when confronted in his mistrust, he held fast to the Word of God in the Faith. Because he was moved to do so, you now, again, can hear the message that God is still God. He is still with us. He who was given the title Emmanuel, truly became one with us, though without sin in Himself. He bore our sins, your sins, into the death and the grave.

That is the message for this Eve of the Nativity of our Lord. God in His incarnation, life and death freed you and me, from our sins. In His resurrection He grants to us new life now! God came and He comes. In Him, you who hear and believe in Him through His Word will be turned from your sins, as was the righteous man, Joseph. You

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 1:20b-21.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 26:56; 27:9.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 1:23; cf. Isaiah 7:14 MT.

too are free to live with God in Christ in eternity. Those divine realities do make for a Merry Christmas!

**The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus**

Eve of the Nativity (Lessons and Carols)

Genesis 3:8-15; Isaiah 9:2, 6-7; Micah 5:2-4; Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 2:8-16; John 1:1-14

December 24, 2014

*Pastor Michael A. Merhouse*

***Solī Deo Glōria***