

Isaiah virtually sings about Jesus when he says: The Lord called me from the womb to be my servant. I will make you a light for the nations. The refrain he had sung earlier was the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. We know all that. We heard it all-over-again not long ago at Christmas-time. Jesus is the Word of God, who came to be where all that flesh is, and God lived Himself in that flesh. The Lord God Almighty now stands among us, still in His own human flesh. The One who created the ticking of every second put Himself in time, in history, in a certain place.

And He entered ... the way you did: He came as an infinitely small cell, the fullness of the infinite God and the fullness of finite man all in one divinely fertilized ovum. Behold, God has come out from darkness, from behind the Temple veil—and yet you still can't see Him. Not yet. Light remains hidden for a time, for nine months behind the veil of Mary's flesh—the Child, not yet born, called Holy, the Son of God, Son of the Most High (Luke 1: 31-35). No one could see Him, but God was in His “temple,” dwelling with His people (Jn 1:14).

Take your time moving through this great mystery of the Christian faith. God is at work, but in a hidden way. You can't see Him within His mother there. God being found in appearance as a man—taking the form of a servant (Phil. 2:7-8) ... and it begins in the womb. This is God who is so weak! An embryo so fragile that, according to bio-technicians: if you took His 'stem cells,' it would destroy Him ... just as King

Herod would try to destroy Him when He was just a little older. Mighty God ... guarded by nothing stronger than the flesh and tissue of Mary's womb. Hidden in the darkness, but He's coming. You've seen pregnant women before, you know all about that. But here is God's 'new and unique' Man for us, His Son, God-in-flesh for us.

A world like ours today, that renders even a two- or three-day old embryo to be an 'insignificant life' that must surrender to any human desire to snuff it out, or just to be another unwitting donor who gets to give up his or her life in the latest guess of a premeditated lab experiment, this is a world that if consistent must also say that our Lord Jesus Christ—who for nine months lived the same exact way—is also insignificant. If you think that way about Jesus, then it is too easy to say no to Him and His forgiveness, and then you are without salvation. The bright flashing neon lights don't fool anyone: it is utter darkness without the Truth.

We've become accustomed to the strange sound—but the Biblical truth—of saying things like: God was cuddled by His mother Mary; God played in the wood shavings of a Nazareth carpenter's shop; God learned how to walk. The One who created the heavens and the earth ... became flesh, blood and bone like that. Look at any newborn to get a sense of what your God was like, and what He did to save you. The One who has no beginning, sent by the Father, knit together in the womb, born of Mary Virgin Mother. A God who comes so weak, little baby-weak. But that's precisely how your God

works. He has begun this marvelous thing ... and to the whole world it looked like nothing worthwhile will come of it.

Now move ahead, three decades later, witness His cousin John publicly worshipping Jesus as the “Lamb of God who takes sin away” (Jn 1:29). That was the same John, the yet unborn baby boy, “leaping for joy” worshipping in the presence of His Creator God (Lk 2:41-44). So John still worships Jesus. Behold! There is Jesus, there goes God, into muddy, sin-stained Jordan-water where John had been preaching “Repent! Heaven is near!” And there the Father puts His emphatic stamp on Baptism forever, as heaven opens and the Holy Spirit descends like a dove (Matt. 3:16-17)—but don’t miss God Himself standing in that middle-eastern river ... where the sinners are. Looking just like us. And then the Spirit led Jesus out to the desert to do 40 days of skirmish with Satan. Where Jesus, a true Man, the second Adam, says, “Away from Me, Satan!” and Satan must obey, just like when he flees from you at your Baptism.

In just a few minutes we’ve traveled from God’s eternity ... to this Epiphany season ... to this day ... with Jesus. And this is where things are serious. Indeed, John, now that he’s in prison for his preaching—it will go worse for him because of Jesus. But the Lord is into His everyday schedule of fulfilling the words of Isaiah, pulling His flesh out of the Old Testament prophecy. So as the Gospel narrative begins, we know what really is happening behind His weak appearance. Jesus is beginning His ministry... God calling those whom He had in mind, even while they were still in the womb.

Jesus comes here to you today because of the darkness of our world. It is because of the darkness—or what God calls darkness (and you really only know for sure what a thing is when God tells you what it is). As the prophet Isaiah said so long ago: People are sitting, just sitting there in darkness. Suffering in darkness. Mourning in darkness. You have darkness even if you’ve got artificial light to guide all your stumbling. Our culture is “living (if you want to call it that) in the land of the shadow of death” which is to say, they are sitting where death has been and always comes again. Death in you. Death around you. You and I have had several funerals in our lives recently? When is yours? Have you driven by a cemetery lately? Or a Planned Parenthood clinic—do you know what’s there? The great Abortion “Law of the Land” is at work. Death as a “temporary” solution to a so-called pregnancy problem is at work. Though it’s not her body or your body or my body; after the cross, all bodies have been bought by Jesus. Redeemed. You, and every child conceived and foreknown by God before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4), bought with blood, not with silver or gold, or even credit or by a generous health plan.

But still, this is America, and still I am a sinner, and so still, darkness. Maybe it is the long silent darkness of a pressured young mother weeping because she realizes her child she did not keep will never have a birthday, and she wishes now it was otherwise. Or the sadness of a young Christian man who looks back and cries, “I’m not even the kind of person who would ever think abortion is okay”—a young man who will always be a father to a child that will never sit next to him at a ball game. When darkness and death seemed like a

good alternative for a difficult temporary situation—a quick treatment for an “unfortunate” or “unplanned” pregnancy that only God saw in His plan and He found fortunate. Honestly, think close to home, like someone in your family—indeed, Christians having abortions in the same number as unbelievers—there is no difference in finding abortion, that is, darkness, an appealing idol, a helpful so-called “cure.” There is darkness all around us, and in us. But how does that person, how do I, get out of that darkness or any other darkness?

I don't. I can't claw myself out. Neither can you. There is only the Light that breaks in from the outside, outside us. The Light that dawns. Fulfilling exactly what the prophet Isaiah says. Jesus is the only Light for our darkness. And He brings nothing but mercy.

It's practically automatic for Christians to say, “Jesus died for the sins of the whole world,” but when it comes to those certain sins—whatever you have in the dark—sins from the past, we torment ourselves as if “that is certainly the only sin that Christ won't forgive and can't forgive”: my abortion, my letting an abortion happen, my adultery, my divorce, my silence, my lies, or whatever my evil day was, or still is. But God will have none of that. He says this: “The people who walked in darkness ... have seen a great Light. You are a light to the nations that my salvation will reach the end of the earth.” Isaiah can't sing enough about it, this bright Light who shatters darkness. Jesus. Forgiveness. My sin and yours, undone.

What is it like? The yoke, the burden crushing you has been broken off. The Law

you have not kept, always coming up behind you and requiring even more that you cannot do, has now been kept. The club of the slave-driver driving your slavery to your sin and death and the devil has been shattered over God's knee. For God has a face, He has a knee, everything flesh and blood. It is Jesus for you, shattering the yoke of the Law by wearing it Himself, and breaking the rod that beats your back by letting it beat Him in your place. Satan did his worst, but Christ arose as the Victor. It was a strange-looking victory, because it looked like defeat. Just as strange are the gifts: also hidden in plain, ordinary things. A simple thing like water that washes you spiritually clean and unites you with Jesus. Ordinary bread and wine that feed you in an immortal, you could even say, a healing feast. And in place of the death and darkness in your life, you have light and the only true and everlasting life.

It's not just for yourself. It has pleased God for Him who has formed you in your mother's womb, to give you to one another, to help each other, and not to think of yourself, which is what the author of death has always wanted you to do. Mary's body does not belong to her after all. Her womb and every mother's womb is the Holy Spirit's workshop—where He knits for you a body that still belongs to Him for you to take care of for now, and He promises you your glorious, heavenly body in which you will live with God the Father forever. What a marvelous work He does in darkness: in the darkness of Mary's womb, in the darkness of every mother's womb, and even still for those who are yet “sitting in darkness”: Jesus, He remains the great Light.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.