

*Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
Lutheran Church of the Epiphany~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía, Hempstead, New York
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*The Nativity of Our Lord ~ Christmas Day ~ December 25, 2020
Isaiah 52:7-10, Psalm 98, Hebrews 1: 1-12, John 1:1-14*

Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

C: Amen!

The Gospel lesson for today is one of the most complex we have, even though it is so familiar. And I can assure you, it isn't easier to understand if you read it in Greek!

Understanding is a tricky thing. Many of us have a little difficulty understanding or fully comprehending what we can't see. We try to make our world familiar so that our human minds can get a handle on it. That's a challenge when it comes to getting our minds around God, isn't it? We confess that God is three persons, who we call father, son and holy spirit. We recognize the first two as titles for people in relationship to each other, but – "holy spirit?" We recognize the words, but not the feeling or the encounter. Since holy spirit isn't human, it's familiar to us only through the experiences we've had with that spirit during our lives.

We also try to understand how one God is all three different persons at once. We describe our God as all-knowing, all-powerful, eternal, and present everywhere at the same time. These attributes aren't like those of any being we've experienced among people we've met in life, even the smartest, strongest and oldest!

Well, we certainly know what being flesh and blood is all about. And we know what it means to live among people.

Even those of us who haven't had the first-hand experience of the birth of another being in our presence, know that we were born, and we have seen other babies and we have watched them grow – first to child and then to adult.

Those of us who aren't specially aren't able to scientifically explain the various processes that our bodies carry out. The basis for life may still seem somewhat mysterious to us, although existence itself is the most common, everyday thing we know. We live it, 24 hours a day, waking and sleeping, day in and day out.

And that brings us to Christmas. I bet you thought I'd forgotten that that's why we're gathered today. It's a wonderful celebration, this day on which we commemorate the appearance of our God as a baby – as one of us – in our world. It's a joyous thing to make our well-known places look more beautiful than usual with decorations. It's a source of pleasure to experience our relatives and friends (even if it's at a distance, by facetime or zoom this year). It's a delight for us to find concrete ways to thank relatives, friends and co-workers for how important they've been to us, or just to thank them for being a presence in our lives. These efforts can be another way of praising God and giving thanks for our existence.

Some years, like this one, we have a hard time celebrating. Some years, there are losses in our lives. We're sick, or someone we love dearly is sick, or someone we love has died. Or a vital relationship has come to an end in another way.

We've had to live through nine months – and counting – of this virus invading our lives this year. We may have lost our job or our home. Any number of other things might have occurred to create pain and distress for us. In these years, we might become like hermits at Christmas. We don't – and really shouldn't – party much. We don't send out Christmas cards. We celebrate only when we can't find a plausible excuse. Because we just don't feel the joy of the season in our own hearts. And we may feel bad about that. We may think of ourselves a little as failures because our lives are not bright and shining like we think the lives of everyone else are.

But you know, in these years, that's just how it is. And one of the most beautiful aspects of our faith is that our God became flesh and lived among us. So our God knows what it's like to be human. Our God isn't like the Greek and Roman gods who floated around in their own spheres. Our God wasn't born into the penthouse in the Bethlehem Hilton – or in the palace of Herod, the earthly King of the Jews. Our God felt the pain of human life and death. Our God experienced the physical problems and the emotional distress of being misunderstood and rejected.

You know, there is a Greek word in the Gospel text for today that can give us some more insight into Jesus' life on earth. It is *eskenosen*, in the last verse of our passage. The English translation we heard earlier is "lived among us." It also can be translated as "set up a tent." So the last sentence of our passage could be translated as, "And the Word became flesh and set up a tent and lived in it among us." He lived in and about **our** tents, day in and day out. So we know that when Jesus talks about how we are to live with one another, he says it from first-hand

experience. He **knows** how hard the challenge of loving others is, but he also knows that it is possible for humans to strive for that end.

A life-giving aspect of our Christian faith is that we celebrate the same story year after year, over and over again. We tell the Christmas story as children in our Sunday school programs. And then, we watch **our** children saying the same words and singing the same songs that we did as children. And years later, we can see in **our adult children's eyes** the memories of years past as we watch them, watching **their children**, our grandchildren, tell that story again and again.

And that story –that Word – has been with us, during the years of happiness and during the years of growth; during the years of longing and during the years of pain. It has become a part of us, a part of **our** flesh and blood, so that we know it as well as we know our own bodies. And the Word is literally made a part of our flesh and blood when we come together as the community to take Jesus into our bodies in the bread and wine of Holy Communion. And we **will** be able to share in Holy Communion again, now that we will have vaccines to protect us from the virus.

We retell the stories of Jesus' growth and life as a human being among the people of Palestine more than 2000 years ago. In fact, we retell the stories of our God as the savior of the nations even from centuries before that. Look at the language in our readings for today – how they are full of physical references. The psalmist, living maybe 1000 years before Christ's birth, and the prophet Isaiah, in the sixth century BC, praised the Lord's right hand and holy arm that reached out to save the chosen people (Isa 52:10, Ps 98:2). The prophet praised the beautiful feet of the messenger who announces peace and God's return to Zion to redeem Jerusalem (Isa 52:7-9).

The people of God have known our God as **one of us**, since long before the baby was born in Bethlehem. And we've also known God as **other than** us, because the Son always was **with** God and always **was** God – for the Word already existed with God the Father “in the beginning” when creation began. (John 1:1-2).

We also retell the stories of Jesus' life and ministry; of his betrayal, his torture and death; and yes, of his miraculous resurrection and ascension. Year in and year out, in good years and in bad years, as youngsters and as oldsters, in years when we are lone individuals (as this year may be for some of us) and in years when we are tightly knit into a large family, we tell these stories so that they become part of our bones and muscles, to carry us through our lives. When they are so intertwined in

our existence, we can rely on the promise of forgiveness they tell more surely than we can rely on our own blood. We can hope against hope for life eternal with this God who so **understands us** as to **become one of us** so that **we** can have a better chance of understanding **the message** Jesus brings: the **Word Jesus is**.

And, although we do not recognize a living individual who we call “Jesus of Nazareth” walking the earth today, we know that Jesus left Holy Spirit in each one of us who believes, so that we might live the story of Jesus in our daily lives. We live Jesus’ ministry, in our care of each other, and of people beyond our circles of family, church and friends. We live Jesus’ ministry in the love we receive from one another and then pass on to others. God has become flesh and set up housekeeping among us. And **we** live that beautiful and incomparable story into our futures and the future of the world.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. **C: AMEN!**