

The Nativity of Our Lord
John 1:1-14

Merry Christmas!

This is one of two times the world seems to care about what goes on in the church. The other is Easter, of course. They miss the point, obviously, when they make Christmas all about materialism, but what else can you expect from pagans? The reason I bring them up is because I wanted to look at one of the two questions that the world continually asks the church. Sometimes nicely and sometimes not. To be fair, they are hard questions.

The first question is “Why are some saved and not others?” The best answer for this question is “I don’t know!” I know how people are saved... they have the work of Jesus applied to them through faith by the power of the Holy Spirit so that they believe in Jesus and cling to Him for salvation from sin, death, and the devil. If we delve too deeply into why many aren’t saved even though they heard the same Gospel we did, we get into error really quickly. Either we blame God for the righteous condemnation of sinners which paints God as something other than long-suffering, merciful, and loving as He is described in the entire Bible. Or we credit people spiritually dead for contributing to their salvation which paints people as having some good in them, which the Scriptures just don’t allow us to do. So let us stick to our understanding that the Holy Spirit works faith when and where He wills through the means of water and word.

The second hard question is why is there suffering in the world? This is the one I really want to address today. The really simple answer to the question of suffering is because of sin. The world is full of sinners.

Ever since Adam and Eve sinned in the garden of Eden, man is born in the image of Adam instead of the image of God. Men and women are born curved in on themselves with no knowledge of God. They continually act out of self-interest to get everything they can in life regardless of who they hurt along the way. They may play along to get along or they may groom you so that they can fleece you later on, but either way the world is not a kind place. Anyone who thinks that people are basically good is not paying attention! One of our jobs as parents is to prepare our kids for a hostile world. I suppose God could have destroyed all of us immediately, but He actually loves us because we are His creation. He desires all to be saved. And to make that happen, He sent His Son into the world to solve the problem of sin. That's what we celebrate today. God was not content to abandon His creation, but He became personally involved with it in order to save it. Here's the main point for today's meditation:

The Nativity of Our Lord is proof that He cares about you personally and that He cares about your suffering.

I think when people ask "Why is their suffering in the world?" they are really asking, why am I suffering? All of us have suffered, or are in the midst of suffering, or will suffer in the future. If there's one commonality between all people, it's that they experience suffering to one degree or another. Not all of us are smart. Not all of us are athletically gifted. Not all of us are successful, whatever that means. But we all experience some degree of suffering. Sometimes we bring suffering on ourselves by our sin. Sometimes other sinners bring suffering upon us. Sometimes suffering comes from living in a sin-broken world. Whatever the cause of suffering, it is indeed common to all of us. And two questions always seem to come up when we suffer: 1) Why? And 2) Where's God in the midst of my suffering?

We kind of know the why in general, but it's never a satisfactory answer. People come up with all kinds of answers for where's God in the midst of suffering. And there are only three satisfactory answers, or three Christian answers, if you like. God is there for us in the manger, on the cross, and on the altar.

First, God is there for us in the manger. It's what we celebrate today, in fact. But how can we adequately describe the fact that God, the creator of the universe, is a little baby in a manger? John describes Jesus this way:

"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."
(vv. 1-3)

It is probably the greatest mystery of the church. God became Man! The creator of the cosmos became part of His creation! He didn't end suffering by snapping His fingers, but joined us in the midst of our suffering. He joyfully takes on suffering so that He might put an end to suffering without ending us who are the cause of that suffering! He didn't come as a full-grown man like the first Adam. He came as a little baby. Manger is such a nice word. It's actually a feeding trough. The creator of the universe spent His first night with His creation in a feeding trough! Magis marvel at this. Lowly shepherds gave glory to God and praised Him for this wonder.

They marvel and praise God because He is Emmanuel, which means God with us. God doesn't come with all His power and glory and might, but He comes as a defenseless little baby. This is why we love Christmas so much. It's proof that God is with us! Jesus is your Brother!

To be sure, He is your God and your Savior, but He is also your Brother! The Israelites in the wilderness were rightly terrified by God. God is holy. He is awesome. Sinners cannot stand in His presence without being burned up by His holiness. Yet God made a way to be present with us in a way that we aren't consumed by His holiness. We aren't burned to a cinder by His light! He comes as a baby in a feeding trough. O wonder of wonders! God is Emmanuel. God is with and He is one of us!

The second way God is with us is on the cross. God didn't stay a baby. He grew up and became a Man. He came for one purpose. Dr. Luther poetically points out that the wood of the manger becomes the wood of the cross. Jesus doesn't just come to join us in our suffering but to suffer and die for us! As soon as Jesus became a baby in a manger, He was pointed straight at the cross to suffer and die for us. As Jesus tells Nicodemus:

"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life." (John 3:14-15)

Suffering is the result of our sin. Suffering is God's righteous judgment against our sin. God doesn't turn a blind eye to your sin or my sin. He does something about it. He becomes a Man so that He might suffer and die in our place. Jesus on the cross is Jesus being lifted up. And He does this so you and I might be saved from sin, death, and the devil. Jesus on the cross is proof that God loves you. As St. Paul says in Romans:

"For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person--though perhaps for a good

person one would dare even to die--but God showed His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:6-8)

This is why Lutherans historically and traditionally love the crucifix. Jesus, the God-Man, hangin on the cross in our place is proof that Jesus loves us. It's proof that He is with us in the midst of our suffering. O wonder of wonders, My God and Savior died for me!

He makes you His child through His Word and Spirit in faith. As John says:

"But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." (vv. 12-13)

You aren't born a child of Abraham. You can't earn adoption into sonship or daughtership by works. You can't think yourself into His Kingdom. It is given to you as a gift. This is the gift of Christmas. God gives Himself for you and to you.

The third way God is with us is on the altar. Technically, our altar is not an altar. An altar is where sacrifices take place. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was a one-time sacrifice for the sin of the cosmos. He cannot and will not be sacrificed again. His sacrifice on the cross was sufficient for all people of all time whether you were born before His sacrifice or after His sacrifice like we are. The Old Testament saints are saved the same way we are, faith in the Messiah. The rivers of blood that poured from the steps of the temple in the Old Testament taught the people of God what to expect. And He did it! He sacrificed Himself and ended the sacrificial system forever.

Because of this many Christians call the altar in church a table. But we prefer to call it an altar. Christ is not sacrificed again, but the fruit of His sacrifice comes to us from this altar. And on all the altars in the world where the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacrament is rightly administered. Jesus feeds us the Manna from heaven so that we know that He is Emmanuel, God with us!

This is another great mystery of the church. God Himself feeds us His very own body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins and the strengthening of our faith. Jesus knows that you suffer. He joins you in your suffering by joining Himself bodily with you in the midst of your suffering. O wonder of wonders! The Creator of the universe, the Babe in the manger, the Savior on the cross, joins Himself to you. St. Paul asks rhetorically:

“The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” (1 Corinthians 10:16)

The Greek leaves no doubt that the answer to these questions is a hearty, resounding Yes!

Jesus in the manger is proof that God is with you. Jesus on the cross is proof that Jesus loves you. Jesus in His supper is proof that God is with you in the midst of your suffering.

So, be of good cheer! God is with you!

Merry Christmas!