

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Christ is born!

In Matins this morning we sang, "Christ is born, glorify him, come to meet him." It's very important that we remember, although we are gathered here this morning together, the people of God, those who love Christ, that as we approach the holy Nativity, only three days left before Christmas arrives, remember always, spiritual eyes and ears open, that this is the last chance these last few days, that the devil and the demons have to wreck your Christmas. Remember that. They hate, they hate the Incarnation. They hate it. Because of that, they hate mankind who God united himself to. So, keep that in mind even as we're listening to the Gospel and the Epistle this morning, hearing the words of the Liturgy, receiving communion.

Our hearts may be focused on the Nativity and our minds may be a little bit distracted by the plans we still have to accomplish, right? Those presents we forgot to buy, the food that isn't prepared yet. But have your spiritual guard up, not in fear, not in superstition, but knowing that we, as the people of God, are celebrating his incarnation in human flesh, and the enemy hates that. The enemy hates that. So, go forth boldly towards the holy Nativity, making the plans you have to make, accomplishing the things you have to accomplish, but never losing sight of Christ, our Incarnate Lord.

There is always a theme when we hear this Gospel reading this morning, this long genealogy from Matthew. There's always a point that we cannot pass up. No matter how many themes of the Nativity that we're excited about, or that we could stop and teach about and preach about and encourage the people, there is a point we cannot overlook. We find it in the genealogy and in the Epistle reading from Paul today of all of the people, particularly those actual ancestors of Christ, the people that he was actually related to, his family tree, his DNA, who endured through every kind of temptation, every kind of trial, every kind of suffering and never lost their hope in the Messiah who was going to come.

We must never overlook the fact that in this list particularly that Matthew gives to us, this genealogy proving that Jesus is the son of Abraham and is the son of David as was prophesied. Something, by the way, that he couldn't control himself, right? He could not choose his parents, his lineage.

When we look at the prophecies that told of the coming Messiah, from those who he is going to be related to all the way to his garments being torn in two when he hangs, or not torn in two, excuse me, when he is hanging on the cross, the greatest of the prophecies are prophecies he cannot control or manipulate himself. This is a reality of the fulfillment of many of these prophecies, hundreds of prophecies in their detail, don't be ignorant of that.

But it has been fifteen hundred years since God promised Abraham that he would bring forth the Messiah. Fifteen hundred years. They have been waiting a long time. It has been centuries between the last great prophet and St. John the Baptist, the last and the great prophet. They have been waiting a long time through great suffering, through captivity of their nation, through wars and famines, through people rejecting the judges and the prophets that came over and over again, the faithful hanging on to the promise of God that he has made to them, that his Messiah will be brought forth.

When we look at this lineage, particularly the one offered by Matthew, which is related to Joseph's lineage ... there's another genealogy and scripture that is related to the lineage through Mary herself. Christ is related to Abraham and David through both Joseph and Mary. Matthew's genealogy, being

written to the Jews, is being written particularly to show them that he is the expected Messiah that is to come from Abraham and from David, to prove to them that fact.

We notice that in this genealogy, there's something very strange happening, we talk about this every year because it must not be overlooked, that when Matthew is making this genealogy, which typically for the culture at the time would have been only men, the fathers in the family, and also would ... if anything, it would err on the side of pointing out the great people in the family tree. That's what we do, right? That's what human beings do, and instead we find that the cultural norm is being broken by having women included. The cultural norm being broken by having Gentiles included. The cultural norm is broken by having sinners included. We see from the genealogy that we have very particular people called out like Judah and Tamar. Tamar who had to seduce her father-in-law in order to work the will of God and to bring forth their lineage that would lead to Christ. Seduce her father in law.

We have Solomon and Rahab. Rahab who was a Gentile, not a Jew. Rahab who was a prostitute. Rahab who saved the spies of Joshua and brought forth, again, another link in the genealogy leading towards Christ. We have Obit and Ruth. Ruth, again, a Gentile, who chose voluntarily to become a Jew, to be adopted to Israel, and brought forth the link in that part of the lineage of Christ. We have David and Bathsheba giving birth to Solomon. Solomon who was loved by God, this incredibly wise spiritual man, whose mother and father came together through the fruit of murder and adultery. I like to point out that if this was an invented religion, none of that would be included. That is not what people invent. You don't undermine the integrity of your own God.

We find that the true God is humble. More importantly, the true God has come to be one of us, not just human, but of us. Us bringing him forth, us sinners, us who fall short of the glory of God, us who love God and have faith but also doubt and regularly turn our back on him in small ways and sometimes big ways.

He comes from a family tree that truly represents the fulfillment of prophecy, and, in great human real detail, the effects of the Fall that we are all struggling against and none of that stops him from coming. He loves us. Remember always that Christ did not come in fulfillment of the will of the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit to save the human race. Remember that, he didn't. He didn't come to save the human race. He did not come to save mankind.

We say that fairly often actually in our hymns and in different expressions of the history of salvation, but he didn't come to save the human race. He did not come to save mankind. He came to save every single one of you and me personally. He's not going to wave his magic wand and save the human race. He is going to come to each and every one of us, to knock on the door of our heart and to be received or to be rejected. He did not come to save this amalgam of persons.

He came to save each of us, each of us individually. When you despair at times, remember that even if you were the only person on the face of the earth, the only human being, Christ would somehow have been incarnate, he somehow would have sacrificed himself, he somehow would have risen from the dead anyways in order to save you. You. That is how much he loves you. That is our foundation, a reality from which we respond to God. We're not trying to respond to him as a representative of all mankind. We are trying to respond to him as me in relationship with him, and my love and relationship and in response to his love for me.

So, this great genealogy is there, and when we look at these things from the history of the Church, we always have two perspectives we look from. We look from a historical perspective, and we look from a personal perspective. So historically, we see that there is incredible rejoicing because the Messiah has

come. After fifteen hundred years of waiting and every kind of difficulty that you could imagine, the Messiah has come. There is incredible, incredible joy, and we are supposed to have a similar joy.

How are we to do that? Literally, how? It was a long time ago. We've heard the story quite a few times. Our entire nation has heard the story, at least they think they have, every year at Christmas. How are we supposed to enter into that joy?

I found a wonderful quote recently from St. Gregory of Sinai in the Philokalia, where St. Gregory is reflecting on the different events in the life of Christ and his ministry on earth. In regards to Nativity, St. Gregory says that in Christ's Nativity ... think about this, this is starting to make it personal for us, in Christ's Nativity is found the essence, the essence, the being and the actual experience of joyfulness. Wonderful quote for Christmas from a great saint. In Christ's Nativity is found the essence and the actual experience of joyfulness. Real joyfulness is supposed to dawn upon us when we contemplate the Nativity of Christ. How are we going to break through and have that experience ourselves?

In Vespers last night we had a number of phrases that should start to suggest to us what our response should be to the Nativity of Christ. They are simple, simple phrases. Listen to them. At Vespers last night, we are encouraged to be clapping our hands. We are encouraged to be singing with joy. We are encouraged to be leaping for joy. We are encouraged to be dancing together. We're starting to get the picture. We're not Pentecostal, but we are going to clap and sing and leap and dance when we come into a full understanding of what the Nativity means.

How do we get there? How do we get there? When I started thinking about this, I realized how far my mind and my heart are from the real essence and experience of joy. How far am I right now? Think about that yourself, but how far are we from literally clapping our hands and singing and dancing and leaping because Christ is born? How far are we from that? I don't know about you, but I'm pretty far away.

I'm very distracted. I'm very busy. I've convinced myself that I have a lot of other greater priorities in my life than celebrating the Nativity of Christ. That's foolishness on my part. So how do we get ourselves into a place of realizing how we're supposed to feel when we think about Christ being born? We're given two themes in everything that we've been singing the last few days, and we will continue to sing between now and Nativity. Two themes, unexpected themes, somewhat seemingly odd themes. One of them is the Three Holy Youths being thrown into the pit of the fiery furnace, the Three Holy Youths. The other theme that we're being given over and over again is Daniel in the lion's den.

What does that have to do with Christ being born? So, use your imagination. Let's use our imagination, maybe for one of the rare times, to help us spiritually. Imagine being one of the Three Holy Youths. You've done your job, you've been faithful to God. The local government doesn't like what you're doing. You've been condemned to death. They bring you to this really deep pit and they fill it full of fire. They stoke it so hot that it's actually killing the people that are throwing fire in, and you're going to be thrown in. You're going to die. That is what you're anticipating. You are going to fall into that pit. Horribly, your life is going to end. You are going to feel the fire on your face and your hair singeing. Before you die from burning to death, you're probably going to start suffocating as your lungs blister on the inside and cannot inhale any of the oxygen if it's even there.

You're anticipating that experience, and you are thrown in. The horror begins to hit you as you descend into the flames, and you land there and you wait for the heat to start being sensed by your body, to smell the burning hair on your head and instead you feel a cool, moist, dew. You open your eyes and you're in the pit. You're standing on the coals, but the experience, that horror that you are anticipating,

it's been replaced entirely by a wonderful, pleasurable experience of cool dew blowing on your face, like you're on a boat, on the water on a cool day, and the mist from the sea is blowing in your face. You look around and your friends are there with you and they're experiencing the same thing. Can you imagine the joy? Can you imagine the joy? The unexpected has occurred and it brings incredible joy.

Daniel in the lion's den is very similar, right? Condemned to death, brought to the pit where the hungry lions are kept. They've been trained to be hungry. They've been trained to eat you when you are thrown in. You are literally going to experience, like you've seen lots of other people before thrown into the pit. Your tissue, your meat is going to be torn from your bones by wild animals and you accept it. The moment the reality that you are going to die is upon you, and you may be going forward in great faith, but you're not looking forward to the death any more than Christ did when he had knelt and prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane and asked for that cup to pass from him, so not wanting to die in his humanity that he sweated blood.

That's how horrible facing death is when we have the time to contemplate it. You're thrown into the pit with these wild beasts, these wild lions, and instead of tearing you apart, they come up to you like 700-pound kittens. They rub up against you and they purr. They gather around you. They want to be scratched behind their ears. Imagine the joy that you would have knowing you have been saved and knowing that it's a miracle. That's how we're supposed to feel when we look at baby Jesus in the manger.

He's come to save us. We are dying. It's just a lot slower than being thrown into a pit of fire or thrown to the lions. We are going to face death. Death to a great way, not so much after the resurrection of Christ, but at the time of Christ, particularly death ruled in the world. Death was worshiped. Even the Jews looked forward to only being remembered only through the seed of their children that go after them. Being forgotten otherwise, being a nothingness, no matter how righteous they were, and they were delivered from death by the advent of the birth of this little baby. Not the Messiah coming in great glory, not leading a great army, not conquering all the people on their behalf. A little vulnerable baby in a manger that has to be cared for, or he will die, because he's one of us. He's one of us. He's not skipping anything that we have experienced.

St. Athanasius the Great says that, that which was not assumed by Christ was not healed by Christ. In other words, he assumed everything about our humanity that all that all of it might be healed. So, let's get ready. I hope you feel that in your heart maybe a little bit of a desire to dance and to sing, to clap your hands. Maybe you can practice it alone in your prayer closet.

We have to get back to the innocent wonder of God coming into the world. We have to get past all of our cynicism and our speculation and get back to realizing what he has really done for us. That he has delivered us like he delivered the Three Holy Youths and Daniel. That he has delivered us from death as he delivered them. And that our response to that is to celebrate, is to celebrate in joy.

So in the midst of preparing, still for Nativity, in the midst of celebrating all of these great ancestors of Christ whose memory we remember today, find that little innocent believer on the inside of you and rejoice in the birth of Christ. Put away the worries and the concerns and the doubt and the cynicism of the world that affects us so much. Get back to loving him come into the world to save us each personally. Get back to him the innocence and the vulnerability that we have to offer as well, as he did as a babe in the manger, that we might feel that joy. That as St. Gregory inspires us to believe that in contemplating and entering in, in faith, to the joy of the Nativity, that we would start experiencing the real essence, and the real experience of what joy offered by God really is.

Christ is born!
Glorify Him!
God bless you.