

Sermon for Christmas Day
December 25, 2021
St. John Chrysostom, “Homily on Christmas Morning”

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The story of the Nativity is a story about a birth. None of us can remember our birth. Oh, perhaps the story of your birth was told to you by your mother or father. For most of us, the details of our birth story is not all that important and certainly not known to billions of people around the world. Our birth story probably never made it past a family dinner conversation...once or twice, but for a certain little baby born in Bethlehem of Judea over 2,000 years ago, we're still talking about it and we celebrate it every year. His birth is so important, that the Bible even gives us details so we know exactly when what took place took place. St. Luke the Evangelist gave us those details in the Gospel passage that we just heard a few moments ago. Luke gave us many details about the birth, to place it in the context of a certain time. He left out a lot of details, too. He didn't tell us anything about midwives, labor pains, contractions, water breaking, boiling water, or a comfortable bed. All Luke tells us where it comes to location is that it was in a plain, unnamed stable because there was no room in an unnamed inn. In fact, the “inn” was probably a cave!

This child's birth has been the topic of a season for over 2,000 years, because this is God whose incarnation among humans we celebrate. The creator of the entire universe loved us so much that he became one of us; he loved us so much that he subjected himself to the vulnerability of infancy, the burden of adolescence, the evolution into adulthood. He loved us so much that he spent some of his adult years teaching humankind how to live in a better manner amongst ourselves, how to treat one another with respect, how to love one another. He loved us so much that he wanted to show us how to make this world a better place for all humanity. He loved us so much that he was even willing to be tortured and crucified, so that he could show us that he was real, and that he loved us more than we could ever imagine, and that once we knew that, we'd also know that there is something to strive for after this mortal life is finished. Jesus' being born means that our ultimate salvation is guaranteed! That's what the name of Jesus means...Yeshu'a: salvation—he saves.

But it goes deeper than that. This morning, as I always do on Christmas morning, I would like to offer the wonderful, timeless, and historic homily of the 4th Century church father, St. John Chrysostom:

BEHOLD a new and wondrous mystery. My ears resound to the Shepherd's song, piping no soft melody, but chanting full forth a heavenly hymn. The Angels sing. The Archangels blend their voice in harmony. The Cherubim hymn their joyful praise. The Seraphim exalt His glory. All join to praise this holy feast, beholding the Godhead here on earth, and man in heaven. He Who is above, now for our redemption dwells here below; and he that was lowly is by divine mercy raised.

Bethlehem this day resembles heaven; hearing from the stars the singing of angelic voices; and in place of the sun, enfolds within itself on every side, the Sun of justice. And ask not how: for where God wills, the order of nature yields. For He willed; He had the power; He descended; He redeemed; all things yielded in obedience to God. This day He Who is, is Born; and He Who is, becomes what He was not. For when He was God, He became man; yet not departing from the Godhead that is His. Nor yet by any loss of divinity became He man, nor through increase became He God from man; but being the Word He became flesh, His nature, because of impassability, remaining unchanged.

And so the kings have come, and they have seen the heavenly King that has come upon the earth, not bringing with Him Angels, nor Archangels, nor Thrones, nor Dominations, nor Powers, nor Principalities, but, treading a new and solitary path, He has come forth from a spotless womb.

Since this heavenly birth cannot be described, neither does His coming amongst us in these days permit of too curious scrutiny. Though I know that a Virgin this day gave birth, and I believe that God was begotten before all time, yet the manner of this generation I have learned to venerate in silence and I accept that this is not to be probed too curiously with wordy speech.

For with God we look not for the order of nature, but rest our faith in the power of Him who works.

What shall I say to you; what shall I tell you? I behold a Mother who has brought forth; I see a Child come to this light by birth. The manner of His conception I cannot comprehend.

Nature here rested, while the Will of God labored. O ineffable grace! The Only Begotten, Who is before all ages, Who cannot be touched or be perceived, Who is simple, without body, has now put on my body, that is visible and liable to corruption. For what reason? That coming amongst us he may teach us, and teaching, lead us by the hand to the things that men cannot see. For since men believe that the eyes are more trustworthy than the ears, they doubt of that which they do not see, and so He has deigned to show Himself in bodily presence, that He may remove all doubt.

Christ, finding the holy body and soul of the Virgin, builds for Himself a living temple, and as He had willed, formed there a man from the Virgin; and, putting Him on, this day came forth; unashamed of the lowliness of our nature.

For it was to Him no lowering to put on what He Himself had made. Let that handiwork be forever glorified, which became the cloak of its own Creator. For as in the first creation of flesh, man could not be made before the clay had come into His hand, so neither could this corruptible body be glorified, until it had first become the garment of its Maker.

What shall I say! And how shall I describe this Birth to you? For this wonder fills me with astonishment. The Ancient of days has become an infant. He Who sits upon the sublime and heavenly Throne, now lies in a manger. And He Who cannot be touched, Who is simple, without complexity, and incorporeal, now lies subject to the hands of men. He Who has broken the bonds of sinners, is now bound by an infants bands. But He has decreed that ignominy shall become honor, infamy be clothed with glory, and total humiliation the measure of His Goodness.

For this He assumed my body, that I may become capable of His Word; taking my flesh, He gives me His spirit; and so He bestowing and I receiving, He prepares for me the treasure of Life. He takes my flesh, to sanctify me; He gives me His Spirit, that He may save me.

Come, then, let us observe the Feast. Truly wondrous is the whole chronicle of the Nativity. For this day the ancient slavery is ended, the devil confounded, the demons take to flight, the power of death is broken, paradise is unlocked, the curse is taken away, sin is removed from us, error driven out, truth has been brought back, the speech of kindness diffused, and spreads on every side, a heavenly way of life has been planted on the earth, angels communicate with men without fear, and men now hold speech with angels.

Why is this? Because God is now on earth, and man in heaven; on every side all things commingle. He became Flesh. He did not become God. He was God. Wherefore He became flesh, so that He Whom heaven did not contain, a manger would this day receive. He was placed in a manger, so that He, by whom all things are nourished, may receive an infant's food from His Virgin Mother. So, the Father of all ages, as an infant at the breast, nestles in the virginal arms, that the Magi may more easily see Him. Since this day the Magi too have come, and made a beginning of withstanding tyranny; and the heavens give glory, as the Lord is revealed by a star.

To Him, then, Who out of confusion has wrought a clear path, to Christ, to the Father, and to the Holy Ghost, we offer all praise, now and for ever.

Today we celebrate an event from over 2000 years ago when the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us—God pitched a tent in the midst of the chaotic world and became one of us to show us how to be more like him and how to live with each other. The celebration of the nativity reminds us that the love of God and the light of Christ constantly breaks into our broken world, and that gives us hope. He came to a world that was as dysfunctional then as ours is now. We just have more powerful machines and weapons, and better technology. Celebrating his birth every year reminds us that we can be kind, generous, thankful, and loving in a world that desperately needs more kindness, generosity, gratefulness, and love. So this Christmas and every Christmas, let us keep the light of Christ burning brilliantly in our hearts. Amen.

Resource

St. John Chrysostom, “Homily on Christmas Morning” (<http://blogs.ancientfaith.com/glory2godforallthings/2008/12/23/st-john-chrysostoms-christmas-homily/>)