

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως  
**Christmas Day – Proper 3; 25 December 2016**  
**Epiphany Seattle**  
(rev. 201612231026)

**The Feast of Nativity: Jesus Comes**

**I. Winter Solstice**

This past Thursday was the winter solstice. The day of the solstice is the shortest day of the year, and brings with it the longest night. When we think of winter darkness, Thursday was the day when winter does its worst and we turn the corner. The days start getting longer again. In some communities of not too long ago, the winter solstice was a time to eat meat: to slaughter the livestock one wouldn't be able to feed over the remaining winter months. It was the day that the wine and the beer from the most recent harvest had fermented sufficiently to be enjoyed. In other communities, the winter solstice represented the beginning of the long hunger as food stocks ran out and people waited for the coming of spring when the earth would once more produce new food for them.

The ancient Romans recognized the winter solstice on December 25<sup>th</sup>. They celebrated it as the birthday of *Sol Invictus*: the unconquerable sun. This date and this celebration eventually were co-opted by Christians, who identified Jesus Christ the Son of God with the great sun that gives light and warmth to all of creation. The darkest part of the winter seemed a proper time to celebrate the coming of Christ. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” Indeed, it is in the darkness that the light is most visible. “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” Jesus did not avoid a dark world or dark places in the world, but came intentionally into the darkness, to bring God's light.

## II. Nativity

As we celebrate the Nativity of Jesus Christ, we celebrate God's gift of God's self, wrapped in swaddling cloths, and lying in a manger. It all happens under very mysterious circumstances. There is much darkness and sleep and dreaming in our account. In my mind's eye, everything is taking place at night, in the quiet and the dark.

A young girl, unmarried, turns up pregnant. Her fiancée, *who is not the father*, somehow decides to marry her anyway. Angels speak to shepherds in a field by night. They are sent to find a king, but he lies among the animals. Who at that time could possibly comprehend what was going on? All is darkness and obscurity.

The writer of our Gospel today, with the benefit of hindsight and reflection, tries to explain by reaching back to Genesis, by reaching out into an eternity that transcends time. John writes "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God." There is no baby in John's Gospel, but an eternal Divine Word, embodying God, but not exhausting all that God is. This is mystery in this! We hear of light and darkness and a world that rejects its Creator. But those who do not reject, the Creator adopts. They become like the Son of God, like that Divine Word.

## III. Children of Darkness / Light / God

When I hear this description of mystery I can feel discouraged. Light is commonly associated with enlightenment: understanding. But there are many things I do not understand. There are questions I cannot answer and circumstances that don't make sense to me. Bombs falling on Aleppo, drones raining fire, and people everywhere being divided and labeled: good, bad; black, white; citizen, terrorist; us, them: these things don't seem to match up to God's promises of goodness and sweetness: the promise of heaven. Where is God in this world in which I live?

The gift of the nativity, however, is this: sometimes I forget that God is here. Sometimes I look and all I can see is darkness and God's absence. Exactly there, where I forgot and thought that maybe God wasn't, is where Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, was born. In the midst of poverty and as a refugee from a murderous despot. In a cave without any doctors, pain medication, plumbing, or even just decent light, God chose to be born. In a time of expectation and crucified revolutionaries, God chose to be born. Because darkness is not dark to God. The darkness may not have received the light willingly but it was (and is) powerless to stop it! In fact, in the darkness the light shines more brightly!

So God sent us a reminder, wrapped in swaddling cloths, that life in God's Kingdom involves spitting up and dirty diapers. It involves childhood illnesses and the indignities of puberty. Life in God's Kingdom involves disappointment and heartbreak; rejection, hard labor and unappreciative audiences. Life in God's Kingdom can totally include being homeless. At the beginning of Jesus' life he was laid in a manger. Towards the end, he told a prospective disciple that while foxes have holes and birds have nests, the Son of Man has no place to lay his head. To live in the light, to be enlightened, to dwell in the Kingdom of God, to be very God, does not exempt one from hard things. Jesus did not shy away from pain. Some might even argue that pain is a critical ingredient for bringing into focus the image of God in which we were created. In the face of pain God's presence is all the more apparent.

Jesus born of Mary is not a secondary God, a concession God made to fix something that had gone wrong. To everyone who is willing to believe, the Kingdom of God is here, it is this close. All the good and the bad and the noble and the ugly things in our lives: they are all places in which to discover the grace and truth with which Jesus lived then and lives still today. Jesus is here in the light places, the sweet places of life: sometimes we fail to see Jesus there because it can be hard to see light in the midst of light. But it is in the dark places where Jesus really stands out.

God's perfect, unexpected gift is not the gift of escape or relief or radical change. It is instead a reminder: God loves you, God accepts you, God is present with you even now in friendship and affection. In dark times and in times of joy, God is there. If you will pay attention to the reminder in the manger, to that light shining in the darkness, if you remember that the Image of God is alive in you in the all the crazy twists and turns of your life, then you too can live as a citizen of the Kingdom of God, full of grace and truth, discovering the joy of God's love for you.

**Questions:**

1. Why did the incarnation have to happen? Was it to rectify a mistake God made?
2. What part does suffering have in a perfect life?
3. What do you lack in the quest for a good life?