

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

We hear these words from our Gospel reading again – **John chapter 1:12–13** “**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.**” So far the word of the Lord...

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ – though John does not have a Nativity account, the goal of the Gospels is united: “**These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name**” (Jn 20:31). St. John begins his account at the “beginning” – the very beginning. This brings to mind another account of the beginning... “**In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth**” (Gen 1:1). On the sixth day – God created man in His own image (Gen 1:27). God gave man free will – they were not His puppets to control. Before the Fall, God walked and talked with man in the garden. This was good! God and man shared an intimate relationship. It was not a forced or coerced relationship, but one of love. Man rejected God’s love when he fell into sin. It was sin that separated man from God. Death was introduced to the world. No longer would this relationship be one where God and man walked alongside one another. From that moment forward all men born in the natural way would be conceived and born in sin (AC II 1) and this sin would separate them from God. But praise God – all was not lost! God’s desire for this good relationship does not go away. He longs to be with His people. He longs for this intimate relationship to be restored.

We see God's desire to dwell among His people manifested in His tabernacling (i.e. dwelling) among His people as pointed out by our Old Testament reading for this Christmas morning. Wherever the cloud or the pillar of fire lead the people – there was the Lord. Surely this was a comfort to His people. If you could not sleep at night, you could step out of your tent and look to the tent of the tabernacle. There you would see the pillar of fire. *“Ah, God is still among us. All is well.”* And in the day, if you wondered whether you should stay put or travel, or which direction to travel, you looked to the cloud. *“It's okay, God is leading us.”* However, even though God was among His people, sinful man could not enter into God's holy presence (Ex 40:35). The intimate relationship between God and man had not yet been restored.

Eventually the tabernacle would be replaced by a slightly more permanent dwelling place for the glory of the Lord – Solomon's temple (1 Ki 8:10–12, 27). Yet, even this man-made temple of the Lord would not last. This man-made temple paled in comparison to another temple – a greater temple, one which would be destroyed and in three days raised up (Jn 2:19). This temple – the place where God tabernacles, where God dwells among us – this is Jesus Christ. Yes, **“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” (Jn 1:1–3).** God comes to us no longer in cloud or fire, but concretely in the flesh – now **“the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14).**

Jesus Christ is God the Word incarnate. He is Immanuel – “God with us” (Is 7:14). This is the mystery of Christmas. The eternal God came down into flesh by the overshadowing of the Virgin

Mary by the Holy Spirit. He was not conceived in the natural manner. He was conceived and born without sin. God remained true God and became true man, *“not by the conversion of the divinity into flesh, but by the assumption of the humanity into God”* (Athanasian Creed). This is what is so important to us for our hope and for our salvation. God came into flesh to redeem flesh, to raise it up. He came as a man to redeem all of mankind, to make man participate in His divinity. He came to rescue man from sin and death because of His great love for us. He longs to dwell with His people – not temporarily, but eternally. Yet we remain free to reject His love – He will not force Himself upon us. God desires that all would be saved, but sadly there are those who reject Christ who will not receive Him (Jn 1:11).

“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” (Jn 1:12–13). Our Lord Jesus Christ offered Himself up as the one sufficient, atoning sacrifice for sin so that we might become children of God. Now men are not merely born of the sinful flesh by their mothers but they are born again, anew, in the waters of Holy Baptism, born of the righteous and sinless God. How fitting our Epistle reading is: **“When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life”** (Titus 3:4–7). According to His own mercy He saved us! When a child is born he does not choose his mother or his father. We did not choose Jesus. Jesus – out of His great mercy and love for us – chose

us to participate in His death and His life that we might be joined to Him eternally! God gives this right to become His children to you as a sheer gift. He gives it to you because of who He is and what He has done. Who He is and what He has done is love. In Christ, we are born anew. In Christ, we are clothed with righteousness. In Christ, the intimate relationship is restored. We are made children of God.

The love of God is an incarnate love; a love our God lived out in flesh and blood, a love which offers us forgiveness in Christ's own flesh and blood in with and under the bread and the wine of the Lord's Supper. It is among us here – a present reality. Love is not simply some emotion floating around abstractly. It is present in Jesus, who reached out to people – even seemingly unlovable people. He drew near to sinners; He touched people who were hurting. He touched them and brought them the forgiveness of God. That love of God has touched us through His Word, (i.e. Jesus) and is in us. Baptized into Christ, Christ is in us, the love with which He has loved us is in you and me.

Jesus proclaims this love: **“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love” (Jn 15:9)**. Jesus defines this love: **“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13)**. Jesus demonstrates this love by His death on the cross where death was defeated. There St. John and all the other eyewitnesses were enabled to say **“we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14)**. And Jesus freely offers this love to you and to me. **“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” (Jn 1:12–13)**. In Christ, we are made children

of God. In Christ, our relationship with the Father is restored. It is only in Christ that we can truly enter into God's holy presence.

What is the reason for Jesus' dwelling among us? I couldn't say it better than Paul Gerhardt in his Advent hymn "*O Lord, How Shall I Meet You*":

Love caused Your incarnation;
Love brought You down to me.
Your thirst for my salvation
Procured my liberty.
Oh, love beyond all telling,
That led You to embrace
In love, all love excelling,
Our lost and fallen race. (LSB 334:4)

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ – the reason is love. **“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14)**. He dwelt among us not only at Christmas so many years ago. But He continues to dwell among us now in Word and Sacrament that we may dwell with Him. Yes – today we may remain confident of God's dwelling among His people. We have God's promise given to His people through His prophet Zechariah: **“Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for behold, I come and I will dwell in your midst, declares the LORD” (Zech 2:10)**. God keeps His promises. We need not wonder if the Lord has abandoned us. We need not look to the cloud or the pillar of fire for assurance of the presence and guidance of the Lord. Today, when we wonder what God's will is for us – we pray the prayer that Jesus taught us, specifically – *God, Thy will be done*. For **“God's will is done when He breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want us to hallow God's name or let His kingdom come; and when He strengthens and keeps us firm in His Word and faith until we die. This is His good and gracious**

will.” (Third Petition) We may take comfort in the reality that God is where He promises to be present – in His Word and Sacraments. Through His Word and His Sacraments God strengthens our faith. Thanks be to God that He has given us these signs and wonders that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God who died and rose again for you. Hear the Word which proclaims Christ’s love for you. Receive the meal where Christ offers the forgiveness of sins out of His great love for you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

The peace which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.