

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

My brothers and my sisters in Christ Jesus, today, on this celebration of Christmas, we are going to focus on birth. It's something that many, if not most of you, have experienced and stood in awe of at some point in your life, whether just a couple of weeks ago or many, many years ago—meeting a child after it has come into the world. As you peer down upon that little package, a little body tightly wrapped up in a blanket, with a little cap on its fuzzy little head. Eyelids neatly closed as ever so softly air whispers in and out of the holes of their nostrils.

It looks both impossibly young and infinitely old. What was once before something hidden and unknown has now taken shape as a unique human being. And you think of all the beautiful possibilities that will present themselves for this very young child. A life ahead of it where it can be and achieve amazing things. The joy and laughs that will be ahead of them, the smiles, the love it will show, countless little surprises that will come their way.

However, we may be moved there, peering down into a bassinet with feelings of concern and even tears because you, as an adult, know a lot more than this little package about the ravages of the world that this little one is now entering. A fallen, sinful world that we call our home for a time. A world in which its needs will never feature too highly on a list of a stranger, in which it will be told to grow up and stop pitying itself, in which it will earn its pay by ruthlessly competing with others, in which it will not be those whom it desperately wants to be, in which it will be targeted by jealousy, and envy, in which it will struggle to understand itself, in which it will make terrible decisions that will have awful consequences.

It will be ignored, humiliated, it will be in pain, and lonely, terrified of the future, and remorseful about the past. It will have to drag itself to a job that is unfulfilling and crushing; it will have arguments with a spouse that will cut them to the core. It will, at some point, have to say goodbye to the most important people in their lives in a hospital room.

What do we see as we peer into the manger? At a little baby Jesus. We have sung the beautiful hymns that we know so well, picturing a cute little baby with his parent smiling as they gaze upon this immaculate boy in a dazzling white swaddle. As fuzzy little cattle sing along to praise the King of the universe. Where in the distance, the shepherds go along in the town singing to the backdrop of a starry and quiet night. All is well, as the Word was made flesh, and that's the end of that. And we could be under the same assumption that this little baby boy with such a celebrated birth would have just as celebrated of a life.

But that birth, the birth of Jesus, the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us, was anything but that. Even from the start of Jesus' life, it is the makings of a tragedy, One that his parents would have known all well. While it seems to be such a wonderful thing in our songs, the start of Jesus' dwelling was not one that would be wonderful. His mother would have to yell and bleed in a filthy barn, far from the comfort of their own home, to give birth to a boy as animals clucked and hollered. No soft place to lay him, so he was put on top of the animal feed in whatever strips of cloth they had with them.

And even though this little boy Jesus was perfect, his dwelling among us would still be wrought with unbearable suffering. There are no illusions about what was in store for this perfect little boy. This baby would walk on a sinful earth and would suffer all of the pains that it had in store and far more significant than that. This baby will not get through this dwelling without agony. Even though he would treat the ones around him with love and guidance, they would not. There would be those like John who would point to him as the light of the world, and yet, they would

reject him. Those whom he would seek and serve and desperately try to save would, would not recognize him. Despite that perfect baby coming to those who were his own, his own would not receive him.

Already in the manger, there is the shadow of the Calvary. Because the baby, before he would return to heaven, would have to endure other sufferings as well. He would be beaten with blows and spit on, being mocked as a fraud for the very thing he was there to accomplish. Brought in front of a sham trial. A crowd of people rejected him for a rioter Barabbas. Flogged and beaten. Nails and spear shall pierce him as he hangs upon the cross. That perfect baby boy would endure all of hell's fury, separated from God the Father's presence as he took the punishment for the sins of all people. Of all people who live and whoever lived and whoever will live. That baby would die; he would give up his spirit. His flesh would be laid on a stone slab and mourned over by those who loved him.

Why? Why would God himself choose to do this? Unlike every other baby that has ever been born, God had a choice. And the infinite decided to take on this weak, frail flesh; the immortal chose to bleed, and the all-knowing picked a limited human brain. Well, John puts it so beautifully: **Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—13 children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.**

Jesus was born as that baby, a baby born for hardship, for agony, for rejection, for Calvary. For you. The Word was made flesh and made his dwelling among us so that you and I, and every little baby that laid before you in the bassinet, could be called children of God. And when you become a child of God, through Baptism, when the Holy Spirit works on your heart to believe in his name, it changes the tragedy of life into one of joy.

Because those hardships that everyone will face, will not be faced alone. They will happen under the watchful eye of the Savior who himself dwelled in the flesh and suffered as we do. Those horrible mistakes and sins that we all will inevitably commit are wiped clean as our Father says that because of the life of that baby Jesus, your sins are forgiven. Even death itself, a terror that no parent can ever shield us from, does not sting. Since that baby, Jesus rose from death and gives you the promise of a life after this one. A life free from the torments, the agonies, the rejection, the envy of others, jealousy, and rage, from death.

As we peer into the manger, we see the tragedy of Christmas; there in that manger is a baby who is destined to die. We see God himself wrapped in vulnerable human skin. We see God as a human, moving to a crucifixion. And that was all part of the plan. Because there is a happy ending to that tragedy, of the baby in the manger, it is the happy ending of you, Christians, being called children of God. Children whose sins have been forgiven by his blood. Children who have eternal life with him.

The Word became flesh, and made his dwelling among us. Amen.