

The Nativity of our Lord; Christmas Day, 2023
+ John 1:1-14 +
“His Manger Is Our Paradise”

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him everything was made, and without him not one thing was made that has been made. In him was life, and the life was the light of mankind. The light is shining in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man, sent from God, whose name was John. He came as an eyewitness to testify about the light so that everyone would believe through him. He was not the light, but he came to testify about the light.

The real light that shines on everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not recognize him. He came to what was his own, yet his own people did not accept him. But to all who did receive him, to those who believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. They were born, not of blood, or of the desire of the flesh, or of a husband's will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and dwelled among us. We have seen his glory, the glory he has as the only-begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

The prolific and masterful Lutheran hymn-writer Paul Gerhardt wrote this as the first verse of what is, in my opinion, his most profound and beautiful hymn of all:

O Jesus Christ, Thy manger is
My paradise at which my soul reclineth.
For there, O Lord, Doth lie the Word
Made flesh for us; here in Thy grace forth shineth.

Gerhard's hymn rightly teaches that Jesus' manger is our paradise from which grace shines forth. Why is Jesus' manger our paradise? What does it mean that the Word lies within it or that the Word was made flesh for us? The Word lying in the manger is the eternal Son of God who, St. John writes, was with God and was God from the beginning. So the one through whom everything that is made was made became flesh, was made man. That little baby in the manger, whose birth we celebrate today, is the eternal God.

But why does Gerhardt call this our paradise? It's why the Word came into our world. It is because the Word-Made-Flesh in the manger opens the gates of heaven to all people. The Word-Made-Flesh in the manger makes our salvation trustworthy and sure. In that manger lies our victory over Satan; in him is our conquest over death. In that manger lies our reconciliation with God, the appeasement for God's wrath against our sin. In that manger lies our salvation. And this is most certainly true.

The baby is Jesus is the eternal Word joining our camp! In the enemy's camp, which is the camp of death and hell, stands Satan, that great Goliath, who towers over his victims, that great red dragon with seven heads and ten crowns, whose tail wipes out the lights of heaven. He is an evil foe who has no equal on earth. But now into our camp has entered the Word, who was with God and was God from the beginning. This is an unconquerable Champion. He cannot be defeated. This is the fulfillment of God's promise in the

Garden, when he said that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent. In the manger lies our victory over our strongest enemies. This gives us certainty for salvation.

God became a human being! This means that Jesus' work includes salvation for all people, and God preaches this truth also by sending him to be born in a stable to common parents. He is not here just for the kings and the wealthy, but for everyone from the top of social stratus to the bottom. The Word has assumed our human nature, that is, our flesh and blood, our soul and mind and will – and as he does, he steps in to the place of every human being, no matter who, no matter when. The ancient church father St. Gregory wrote this very beautifully and accurately: "For that which he has not assumed he has not healed; but that which is united to his Godhead is also saved." This means that Christ has opened the gates of heaven to all who possess a human body, mind, soul, and will.

The words, **The Word became flesh** mean that the Son of God has assumed everything that we are. He is like us in every aspect, except without sin. Jesus took on human flesh to save your human flesh. He forever possesses a human soul to save your human soul. Jesus forever possesses a human mind and will to save your human mind and will. Here is a simple, but most important Christmas question: Are you a human? Then the Word-Made-Flesh lying in the manger is your salvation and paradise. The Word-Made-Flesh in the manger means that the gospel is for everyone.

And this is not only an irrefutable spiritual logic derived from the clear words of Scripture. This is the clear and explicit promise of God's Word. God told Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that in their seed all nations of the earth would be blessed. Christ has come to save all people. And the Apostle John makes clear that Jesus comes to shed his blood for all people, as he says, **He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.**

St. John also teaches that the Word-Made-Flesh is the light which enlightens everyone. He comes into the world to shine throughout the whole world. God makes the promise that whoever believes in him will be saved. This again proves that the gospel of Jesus' salvation is for everyone. The Word-Made-Flesh opens the kingdom of heaven to everyone. He makes our salvation trustworthy and worthy of full acceptance.

The Word lying in the manger has won salvation for all people, yet that does not mean that all people are saved. The gates of heaven stand open wide, yet that does not mean that everyone enters it. St. John writes, **He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not recognize him. He came to what was his own, yet his own people did not accept him.** The Word became flesh to save all flesh, but not all flesh will receive this salvation.

In order to walk through the open gates of heaven, you must have faith. Faith, as Scripture makes abundantly clear, is not your work. It is a gift from God. Christ has already done all the work for you. Faith is trusting in the objective fact that God has saved you in Christ Jesus. That manger is everyone's paradise, but if you do not believe it, you don't possess it. Faith makes all the difference. This faith can only be acquired through the gospel, which offers this free salvation through Christ. This is why it is so important that we continue to hear the gospel, receive it in the Lord's Supper, and remember it from our baptism. This is what creates and sustains our faith. This is what entices us to enter those gates, which Christ has opened for us.

St. John says that all who do receive the light, who believe in the name of the Word-Made-Flesh, are given the right to become children of God, not born of blood or the will of the flesh or the will of man, but of God. The eternal Word of God was born of flesh, so that we, who were born of flesh might be born again of the Spirit. It is God's Holy Spirit, who works through the gospel, who causes us to be born again as children of God. This is done, most often, in baptism, where God's Word and promise is joined to water. And so, the gates of heaven are placed at the font where sinners are baptized. The gates of heaven are placed at the chancel, where the pastor absolves sins. The gates of heaven are placed in the pulpit, where the words of eternal life are preached. The gates of heaven are placed on the altar, where Christ's body and blood are fed to Christians. And it is faith that brings you through these gates.

That stable where Jesus slept in a manger was the most blessed place on earth. There is no place you'd rather be. Not because it was beautiful or comfortable or even that Jesus looked different than any other baby. It's because in that manger was the Word-Made-Flesh, who opens the gates of heaven for us. And so it is today that the most desirable place for us to be is where Christ comes to us in faith, not because they look more splendid than other places, but because through faith we know that here we stand before and enter through the gates of heaven.

It's only through faith that we can recognize Jesus' manger as our paradise. Yet, the time will come when we will enter these gates with eyes wide open. We'll see our paradise unveiled and will spend eternity with the Word-Made-Flesh. We recognize the manger as paradise today, so that we may enjoy salvation with our Savior forever.

This is where the master Gerhard ended his hymn. It starts with paradise at the manger, and ends in the paradise to come:

The world may hold
Her wealth and gold;
But thou, my heart, keep Christ as thy true Treasure.
To Him hold fast
Until at last
A crown be thine and honor in full measure.
Amen.

Merry Christmas! Amen.