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The Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord
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Grace-Trinity Lutheran Churches, Wichita
John 1:1-18

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

Back in the 4th century the Church was deep in battle.
While some of the brightest lights of our Church's history emerged in those days,
they arose out of some of the fiercest controversies.

These battles dealt with a question that I'm afraid we've stopped asking:
Who is this Jesus?

On the one hand, we've learned much from those that have gone before.
We know who this Jesus is because of the Scriptures that tell His story,
and the saints that passed on His life and teaching, confessing just what the Scriptures say.

But whenever we take Jesus for granted, we're sure to lose what is most important.
And today, just like the 4th century, we can't afford to lose who this Christ is.

In the 4th century, it was common to think that things were bad.
It was almost self-evident that "stuff," or things—creation—
was less important than spiritual truths.

Much of this comes from a pagan philosopher named Plato.

For Plato, himself a student of Socrates, the table was of no value at all,
but the image or conception of the table in the spiritual realms is what counted—
the thing here was but a shadow.

That's how it was for chairs and trees and fruit and man.

Yeah, and that's where the problem arises—
for Plato, and those who drank of his philosophy, man—
with arms and hair and eyes and a nose—
man was inherently evil.

Now, in the 4th century, the Church was just made legal by Constantine,
and even declared the religion of the Empire.
The Church just began to enter the public conversation,
it just started to openly discuss the things of the world in relation to the things of God.

For the first time, really, you start to have a public conversation about God—
and so it's only natural that theology becomes most refined at this point.

But in this public conversation, the teachings of Plato and the teachings of Scripture meet.

That's where the battle arises.

And central to the whole debate was John's Gospel.
 And more specifically yet, his prologue, the first chapter—
 today's Christmas reading.

Plato said that man, human flesh, the physical and tangible were simply the stuff of a demi-god.
 Creation was the work of a sub-par god, evil intended, and maligning the original image.

But the Scriptures say:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”
 (Jn 1:1)

And a little later on,

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” (Jn 1:14)

There the lines were drawn.

Some Christians were so steeped in Plato that they wouldn't give it up.
 They wanted to find a way to fit it in the Scriptures.

Others were so convicted by the Scriptures, they left behind family and friends,
 all for the sake of this *God-made-man*.

Now, imagine for a second the difficulty here.

The Christian Scriptures (both Old and New Testaments) speak of an original goodness in
 Creation.

Remember, **“God saw all that He had made and behold, it was *very good!*”** (Gen 1:31)

But then Satan stepped in, that cunning serpent.

He tried to steal what was God's.

He tried to take what wasn't his own, luring away and deceiving the creation.

And he managed to have them do it on their own—

the creation left their creator, they abandoned His voice, for the sly words of the devil.

Adam and Eve ate the fruit that God had said not to eat.

And from that point on, creation fell.

So you can see how the minds start churning.

How the 4th century Christians found their merging of Plato and the Scriptures.

Creation had fallen.

Man was lost.

Flesh was sinful.

But the Spirit is good.

We're in the same boat today.

How often we hear, “I'm not religious, but I'm spiritual.”

How often we seek *out of body* experiences.

We try to run from this world at every chance we get—
 some literally, others just wanting an escape.

But the words that rang through the 4th century, that ultimately put down this influence of Plato, were the words of St. Gregory of Nazianzus:

“That which was not assumed is not healed;
but that which is united to God is saved.”¹

For St. Gregory, everything came to a head with Christ.

If man—flesh and blood—is inherently sinful and fallen, that what does that mean for Christ?
If man is the work of a sinful demi-god, if physical and tangible *stuff* is evil,
then what does it mean that ***The Word became Flesh?***

St. Gregory was able to uphold the original goodness of creation,
and at the same time confess the fall of man.

For him, and for us too, the Word became Flesh *for us*.

God became man so that man could be brought back to God.

And that means that this Christ is truly *man*.
He wasn't just in the appearance of man.
He wasn't just a shadow of man.
He wasn't just *spiritually* man.

This Jesus was *true man*, born of the Virgin Mary.
The Word became *flesh*.

And as Gregory says, thanks be to God!

What if He hadn't?
Where would we stand then?
What would happen to us men and what would come of our salvation?

Gregory says that whatever wasn't assumed, whatever wasn't taken up by God,
will not be healed or saved.

So if God is Spirit only, then only our spirit gets healed and saved.

But that won't do you any good because Plato was wrong.
You're not just spirit, you're body and spirit together.
You're a real person, with real flesh and real blood, with real fingers and toes and kidneys too!

If God didn't become man, stuff, one with creation,
then creation would never be redeemed,
never would it return to God,
never would paradise be restored.

¹ St. Gregory Nazianzen, *Epistle 101*.

But that's what Christmas is all about.

Gifts, sure.

Carols and joy and feasts and laughter and family, yes, that too.

But all of this comes first and foremost from God becoming Man *for you*.

It's all about the Lord of heaven and earth, the heavenly and spiritual taking on flesh and blood,
assuming what it is to be human for you.

God puts on the physical, tangible, reality of man,
in order to redeem man, to heal and to save and to pay the ransom for man.

That's Christmas.

It's all about the Word who was God and Is God and yet becomes Man *for you*.

And as man, as God and Man in one person,
this Jesus Christ has come to heal and save and forgive *you*.

So Merry Christmas!

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit