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The Nativity of Our Lord **Christmas Day 2023**

Sermon

Selected verses from John 1

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 all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. To those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Introduction – Some people open Christmas gifts on Christmas Eve and some people open them on Christmas Day but by tomorrow or maybe by Thursday some of the gifts will be gone. The box of fudge didn't last once you started passing it around, the three-year old brother broke the arms off his sister's Barbie doll, and the sweater that didn't fit is on its way back to Amazon. Even the presents we keep don't last long, at least not under the tree. The shirt gets thrown in the wash and hung in the closet, the mountain bike moves to the garage, and the video game gets installed on the computer. After a while you forget they were Christmas gifts. Most Christmas gifts don't last. That's not bad; that's just how it is.

The truth is that Christmas doesn't last, at least not for long. By January 14 the Christmas tree and the Christmas creche will be gone and packed away in our churches. At our house the Christmas decorations will come down even before that; probably at your house, too. We won't be hearing or humming Christmas carols next week. Some of the fun goes away, too. How long do you think you'll remember how good the turkey was or hard you laughed around the table and that we didn't have a white Christmas this year? Look: Christmas memories, Christmas decorations, and Christmas gifts don't last. It's OK. We can't have Christmas all year.

Today's Gospel from John chapter 1 is read in Christian churches all over the world every Christmas Day. John is presenting his version of the Christmas story. But there doesn't seem to be much Christmas here. There's no manger or swaddling cloths, no angels or shepherds, no Mary and Joseph. John understood that his first century readers probably knew the Christmas events from Matthew and Luke. We know them, too. And so John raises our thoughts to something more profound. He lifts our eyes away from a few days in Bethlehem and he takes us into timelessness of eternity. He moves us past the familiar story that little children learn and the details that aging minds forget. He leads us away from a once-a-year celebration to an every-day reality as he describes for us

Christmas Gifts that Last Life...Light...Glory...Grace

You and I simply cannot comprehend what Moses wrote in Genesis 1: **The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.** Those words describe nothingness. We know about spacious skies and amber waves of grain and purple mountain majesties but we know nothing about nothingness. We can figure out eight billion people crowded on our planet but we cannot fathom emptiness. St. John tells us about somethingness: **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 all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.** This Word is the voice God. This Word spoke God's commands at creation; he is the one who said: **Let there be** and there was. The Word put breath into lungs and a beat into hearts. **In him was life**, John wrote. But he did more than create biological life. He also created theological life. God cannot be known or viewed or even imagined, but the Word uncovers God and reveals God. The Word opens the lines of communication between us and God. The Word speaks to us from God and enables us to speak to God. We are not nothing now; we are something; we are something special to God. We live with God and God lives in us. This Word is Christ. But you knew that.

The fudge gets eaten and the sweater gets returned and who really cares. But life with God...who can describe that? There aren't enough words. No one can calculate the value of life with God. With God we have an origin. We are not only the product of biology and we are certainly not an accident of evolution. With God we have an identity. We are persons with individual bodies and souls. We act with reason and not out of instinct. We have a place and a purpose on God's planet. With God we have a destiny. Life with God doesn't end with the end of life. We have a life with God that's still coming. The eternal Word entered our world at Christmas and **in him**—in Jesus Christ—**in him was life. That life is a Christmas gift that lasts.**

Our house will be lit up this afternoon. Lights in every room, lights on the tree, candles on the table, television for the games. Except when we sleep darkness is bad but at least it's only temporary. Darkness is different for the soldier blinded in battle or the baby blinded at birth. Darkness for them isn't temporary; their prognosis is hopeless. There's no light at the end of the tunnel. No light at the end of the tunnel with God, either. Without God, everything is dark and everyone is doomed. Sin takes the light out of hope. Sin imprisons us in lightless dungeons. Sin traps us in deserts at midnight. In the darkness of sin guilt swirls around us, the threat of death spooks us, and we hear the faceless voice of Satan laughing at us. And so the Word entered our world with life and **that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.** Jesus came to our world so we could see God's smiling face and his outreached arms. Jesus turned on the lights of God's forgiveness and stoked the fire of God's love. **And to those who believe in his name, he gives the right to become children of God.** The light of Jesus lightened the household and we came to live there. **That light is a Christmas gift that lasts.**

Christmas is certainly Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger. But what does this all mean for us? John tells us: **The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.** The eternal Word who was with God and was God and who created life and gives us light entered our world as an embryo who became a fetus who became a baby who became a boy who became a man whose name was Jesus. He wept and slept like we do. He became hungry and thirsty as we do. That doesn't sound glorious at all. But the glory we see in Jesus, the brilliance, the magnificence, is not the glory of angels or armies. When Isaiah looked into the future and foretold that **the glory of the Lord would be revealed**, he did not see military might or generals clad in armor. He saw comfort and compassion and a shepherd who would carry his lambs close to his heart. The greatest glory of Jesus is that he died for us. What we put on church steeples and on the center of our altars are not the angels who sang to the shepherds or the crutches of the people Jesus healed with his power. What we adore is the cross on which Jesus died. We praise him for the humiliation he endured in our place. We praise him for the blood he sacrificed to pay the debt of our sins. Jesus gained his glory by gaining glory for us. **We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son full of grace and truth. This glory is a Christmas gift that lasts.**

We see that glory every year in the Christmas manger. We see it again in the Good Friday cross and the Easter empty tomb. But the glory and the life and the light that come from Jesus are gifts that keep on giving. They were achieved in history 2,000 years ago but they continue 2,000 years later. Grace doesn't wear out, it doesn't spoil, it doesn't get old. John wrote: **Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given.** Jesus forgives one sin and then he pardons a worse sin. He answers one prayer and then he grants a harder prayer. He protects us from one trouble and then guides us through a deeper trouble. And so now we sleep without worry, we pray without ceasing, we face trouble without doubt, we live without self-interest, we witness without regret, and we die without fear. Wherever Jesus is, grace comes along. **This grace is a Christmas gift that lasts.**

Our Christmas presents lie near the Christmas tree this morning but they will soon be gone: forgotten, broken, or returned. But **life** and **light** and **glory** and **grace** will still be there, not under a tree but in our hearts and in our lives. The greatest Christmas gift of all came wrapped in the womb of the virgin Mary with the words attached, "To you from Father, with love." Amen.

This sermon was preached by Pastor James Tiefel.