

Christmas Day, Year A
The Very Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
December 25, 2022
Isaiah 52:7-10
Psalm 98
Hebrews 1:1-4(5-12)
John 1:1-14

The Nativity Sermon of St John Chrysostom

One hundred ninety years ago today in the Monroe County courthouse, Christmas Day, the first service was held by the congregation that later that day would officially be named St Paul's Episcopal Church of Key West. Happy birthday, St Paul's! One hundred ninety years young.

What a delight to celebrate the birthday of this most historic congregation, the oldest US congregation of any kind south of St Augustine and along with St Peter's, four blocks further south, the southernmost Episcopal outpost of the Jesus movement in the contiguous US. It's a great day to celebrate. It's also a good opportunity to pause and remember that for the first 300 years of what we now call Christianity, there was no Christmas celebration because there was no Christmas because it hadn't been invented yet.

But then some things and Christianity went from being a persecuted religious minority group to a tolerated religion within the Roman Empire to the personal religion of the emperor to the state religion of the entire Roman Empire. And after that things began to accelerate with respect to the development of what we now celebrate as the feast of Christmas, the festival of the Nativity of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

The earliest Christmas sermon that we have was preached in the year 386, Christmas Day 386. You do the math to figure out how old this thing is [1,636 years old].

The preacher was a young man named John. He preached this sermon in the very first year of his public ministry.

The location of the sermon was Antioch in Asia Minor, which is now Turkey; Antioch, that place where they were first called "Christians."

Later this young man named John would become Bishop of Constantinople and a Doctor of the Church. And after his death he would be canonized as a saint.

Because of his skillful preaching throughout his vocational ministry, he earned the nickname “Chrysostom,” which means “Golden-Mouthed.”

This morning, on the 190th birthday of the congregation of St Paul’s Episcopal Church, Key West, our Christmas Day sermon is a slightly edited English translation of St John Chrysostom’s Christmas Sermon from 386.

Hear these ancient yet fresh words.

The Nativity Sermon of St John Chrysostom

Behold a new and wondrous mystery.

My ears resound to the Shepherd’s song, piping no soft melody, but chanting full forth a heavenly hymn. The Angels sing. The Archangels blend their voice in harmony. The Cherubim hymn their joyful praise. The Seraphim exalt His glory. All join to praise this holy feast, beholding the Godhead here on earth, and humanity in heaven. He Who is above, now for our redemption dwells here below; and he that was lowly is by divine mercy raised.

Bethlehem this day resembles heaven; hearing from the stars the singing of angelic voices; and in place of the sun, enfolds within itself on every side, the Sun of justice. And ask not how: for where God wills, the order of nature yields. For He willed; He had the power; He descended; He redeemed; all things yielded in obedience to God. This day He Who is, is Born; and He Who is, becomes what He was not. For when He was God, He became human; yet not departing from the Godhead that is His. Nor yet by any loss of divinity became He human, nor through increase became He God from human; but being the Word He became flesh, His nature, because of impassability, remaining unchanged.

And so the kings have come, and they have seen the heavenly King that has come upon the earth, not bringing with Him Angels, nor Archangels, nor Thrones, nor Dominations, nor Powers, nor Principalities, but, treading a new and solitary path, He has come forth from a spotless womb.

Since this heavenly birth cannot be described, neither does His coming amongst us in these days permit of too curious scrutiny. Though I know that a Virgin this day gave birth, and I believe that God was begotten before

all time, yet the manner of this generation I have learned to venerate in silence, and I accept that this is not to be probed too curiously with wordy speech.

For with God we look not for the order of nature, but rest our faith in the power of Him who works.

What shall I say to you; what shall I tell you? I behold a Mother who has brought forth; I see a Child come to this light by birth. The manner of His conception I cannot comprehend.

Nature here rested, while the Will of God labored. O ineffable grace! The Only Begotten, Who is before all ages, Who cannot be touched or be perceived, Who is simple, without body, has now put on my body, that is visible and liable to corruption. For what reason? That coming amongst us he may teach us, and teaching, lead us by the hand to the things that humans cannot see. For since humans believe that the eyes are more trustworthy than the ears, they doubt of that which they do not see, and so He has deigned to show Himself in bodily presence, that He may remove all doubt.

Christ, finding the holy body and soul of the Virgin, builds for Himself a living temple, and as He had willed, formed there a human from the Virgin; and, putting Him on, this day came forth; unashamed of the lowliness of our nature.

For it was to Him no lowering to put on what He Himself had made. Let that handiwork be forever glorified, which became the cloak of its own Creator. For as in the first creation of flesh, humanity could not be made before the clay had come into God's hand, so neither could this corruptible body be glorified, until it had first become the garment of its Maker.

What shall I say! And how shall I describe this Birth to you? For this wonder fills me with astonishment. The Ancient of days has become an infant. He Who sits upon the sublime and heavenly Throne, now lies in a manger. And He Who cannot be touched, Who is simple, without complexity, and incorporeal, now lies subject to the hands of humans. He Who has broken the bonds of sinners, is now bound by an infant's bands. But He has decreed that ignominy shall become honor, infamy be clothed with glory, and total humiliation the measure of His Goodness.

For this He assumed my body, that I may become capable of His Word; taking my flesh, He gives me His spirit; and so He bestowing and I receiving, He prepares for me the treasure of Life. He takes my flesh, to sanctify me; He gives me His Spirit that He may save me.

Come, then, let us observe the Feast. Truly wondrous is the whole chronicle of the Nativity. For this day the ancient slavery is ended, the devil confounded, the demons take to flight, the power of death is broken, paradise is unlocked, the curse is taken away, sin is removed from us, error driven out, truth has been brought back, the speech of kindness diffused, and spreads on every side, a heavenly way of life has been implanted on the earth, angels communicate with humans without fear, and humans now hold speech with angels.

Why is this? Because God is now on earth, and humanity in heaven; on every side all things commingle. He became Flesh. He did not become God. He was God. Wherefore He became flesh, so that He Whom heaven did not contain, a manger would this day receive. He was placed in a manger, so that He, by whom all things are nourished, may receive an infant's food from His Virgin Mother. So, the Father of all ages, as an infant at the breast, nestles in the virginal arms, that the Magi may more easily see Him. Since this day the Magi too have come, and made a beginning of withstanding tyranny; and the heavens give glory, as the Lord is revealed by a star.

To Him, then, Who out of confusion has wrought a clear path, to Christ, to the Creator, and to the Holy Spirit, we offer all praise, now and forever. Amen.