

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
The Nativity of Our Lord (Christmas Day)
Saturday, December 25th, 2021

Sermon: A Real Boy

Text: John 1:1-18; Hebrews 2:1-11

Focus: Jesus was—and remains—fully human.

Function: That they would wonder at the miracle of the Incarnation.

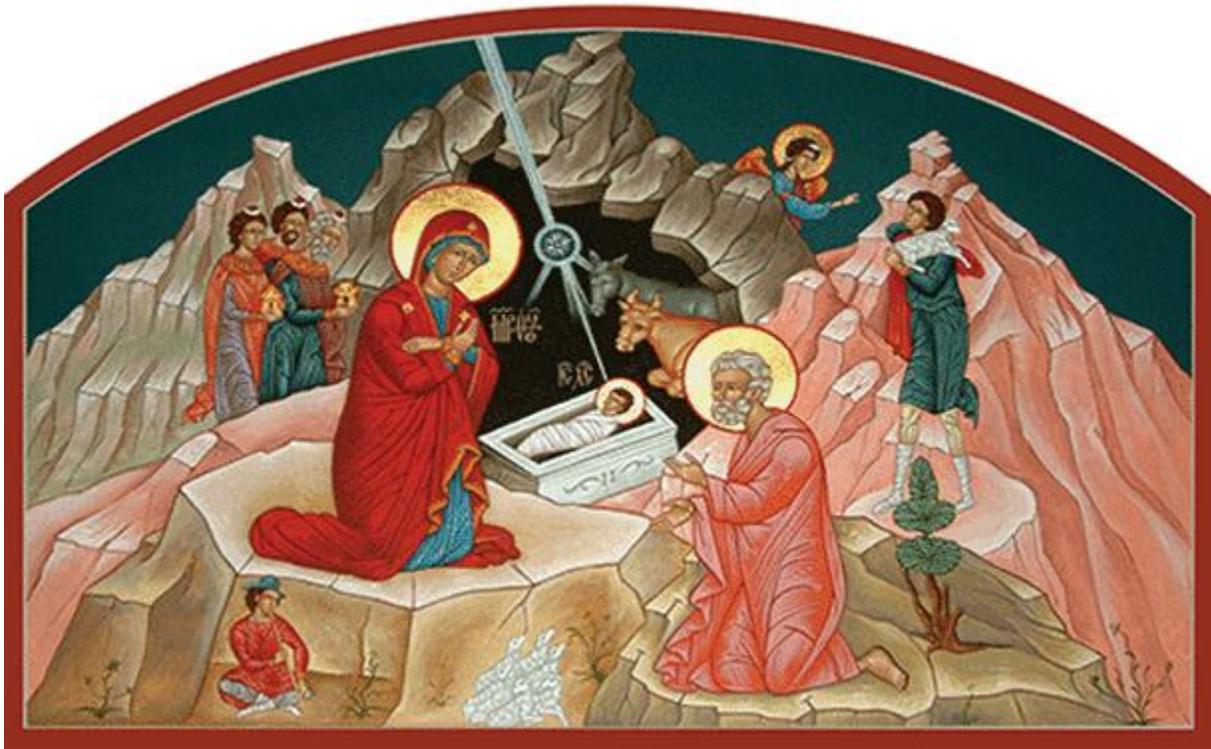
Structure: Image-based

Locus: “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father before eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord...” (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles’ Creed).

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14, ESV).¹ During the Middle Ages—and in Orthodox icons even today—when artists would depict the scene of the Nativity, whether in mosaic or on wood panel, they would frame the baby’s head with a gleaming halo to indicate his holiness. Sometimes light would beam from his face to indicate his divinity. And in these images, the Christ child is almost always wound tightly in swaddling clothes, much like a corpse shrouded for burial.

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

Even the manger looks like a sarcophagus, a foreshadowing of the purpose for which Jesus came. He was a baby born to die.



Yet this is not a human Jesus. The newborn king does not smile or cry for his mother. Unlike real babies and young children, whose heads are disproportionately large compared to the size of their bodies, Jesus in these images looks like a miniature adult—not at all like a child. His face is expressionless. (In fact, in iconography *every* face is devoid of human emotion.) And if Jesus' arms or hands are visible at all, they are raised in the sign of blessing given by Catholic priests during the

Benediction. These are unapproachable pictures of the “*immortal, invisible God, only wise/in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes...*” (LSB 802:1).² While full of color, the icons are as cold as the gold that gilts their edges. The Jesus in iconography is otherworldly.

During the Italian Renaissance, this changed dramatically. While reflecting a Neo-Classical balance in their composition, scenes of the Nativity became more human in their depictions of Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and—yes!—even little baby Jesus. Jesus appears to be made of the stuff of *this* world, for, imbued with a newfound sense of realism and a scientific interest in the form of the human body, the Renaissance depictions show a fat, naked baby with his manhood on full display. Sometimes he sits in his mother’s arms, sometimes he lies on the ground. In either case, his arms reach out for Mary, his protector and provider. Now, instead of the light coming *from* the Christ child, sunlight or lamplight shines down *upon* him. And, perhaps most notable of all, the halos are gone. This baby is as human as they come.

² W. Chalmers Smith, alt., “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise,” in *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 802:1.



But during the 17th century, prudish Protestants began buttoning up the baby Jesus. Most Dutch painters showed him bundled up tightly in his swaddling clothes. Once again, his humanity is hidden, and the light shines from his face as from a lamp. Perhaps Mary peels back a fold of swaddling to reveal Jesus' bare chest. But no peek-a-boo here. No male anatomy to indicate the scandal of particularity. The Protestant painters, influenced by Reformed theology, seem almost embarrassed by Jesus'

humanity. An excellent example of this is the painting by Gerard von Honthorst on the cover of today's bulletin.



But not the Spanish and Italian painters of the Catholic Counter-Reformation! Inspired by the Renaissance, they too were given to realism, although the composition is less balanced and more haphazard—as though you were stumbling upon a scene in real life (yet even here, the figures are often arranged in triangular patterns). Oftentimes, the naked baby Jesus has his tiny manhood on full display.

In one painting, *The Adoration of the Shepherds* by Bartoleme Esteban Murillo, Mary intentionally unclothes her infant to reveal him to the marveling shepherds. Draw a straight line from their eyes, and you can tell that some of them gaze upon his face, while others peer at the anatomy between his legs. Even Joseph has a little smirk on his face. But this is not child pornography. It's church propaganda—theology preached through brush strokes and vibrant color instead of black text on white pages.

And what is that message? That Jesus Christ is truly the Word made flesh, God become man, Immanuel, God with us. He is not a porcelain sculpture or golden image. He doesn't glow in the dark. He is not stilted in a wooden posture of benediction like some kind of Pinocchio. In other words, Jesus is a *real* boy, not just a spirit or apparition merely *posing* as a human (the ancient heresy of Docetism). No, the eternal Logos, the Word of God by which all things were made and all things hold together, the Word who was in the beginning *with* God and *was* God... he became a flesh and blood human being with breath and bone.



This is the scandal of Christmas: that God became man in the flesh of one particular little boy with eyes of a certain color and hair of another, with wrinkly fingers and toes. He cried when he was cold or hungry. He needed his mother's warmth and milk. Jesus was not a generic, neutered Everyman. He was the Son of Man born for us in a particular place (Bethlehem) to particular parents (Mary and Joseph) from a particular people (Israel). Jesus was Jewish, not African, European, or Asian. He wasn't a curly-haired, blonde Norwegian baby,

nor was he a beautiful Chinese child with almond eyes and hair the color of night. He was himself. Yet he came for us.

Now we are confounded even more by Christmas. For even though Jesus came to save the whole world from sin, yet he still deals with us as individuals. He saves us one at a time. He loves us singly—and yet calls us into a community and family greater than ourselves: the Christian Church. How astounding that he should give up a throne in heaven to save poor, miserable sinners like us.

As we read in Hebrews, “What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him?” (Heb. 2:6). We are but a breath, a shadow, a flower that is here today and gone tomorrow. And yet Jesus was born to die for us. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

We have seen his glory. Hmm... Yet how do *we* picture him today? We turn him into a prop in the church’s Christmas pageant—a genderless toy doll. Or we put him on our mantle alongside our other Precious Moments figurines with eyes shaped like teardrops. We draw

cartoon pictures of him in children's Bibles. And sometimes we even turn the Christmas story into a cartoon, an animated film with talking animals with goofy grins and googly eyes. There Jesus isn't even the main event—just a sideshow heard off camera, if he makes any appearance at all.³ In other words, we have cheapened the glory and turned it into sentiment. We've turned Christmas into a nostalgic feeling for a cute, little baby—a reminder of our own childhoods—instead of Immanuel, God-with-us, the Word made flesh. [*Slowly*] In other words, we have *lost* the Word. What a foolish lot we are!

No wonder that the author of the Letter to the Hebrews marvels with the Psalmist: “What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him?” (Heb. 2:6; cf. Ps. 8:4). We are undeserving of this baby born to die for us, this baby who, even now, is trying to be *reborn within* us. “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who *did* receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not

³ I'm thinking, in particular, of movies like *The Star* (2017) produced by Sony Pictures and The Jim Henson Company.

of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:11-13).

This is Athanasius’s famous dictum: God became man that man might become divine. In Jesus, God became flesh and dwelt among us. And in Jesus, we are born again “not of blood..., but of God” (John 1:13). Ever since the Incarnation, God has cost his lot in with humanity. He is committed to us now. He *literally* has skin in the game—and eyes and hair and teeth and fingers and toes and a belly button and a nose (and yes, also that thing between his legs). Jesus was a real boy—and *is* a real Savior.

Through Jesus, God becomes our Father. And Jesus, for his part, is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters (Heb. 2:11). No matter how we picture him, whether with halo and swaddling clothes, or naked with pink skin and fat rolls, the picture that matters most is the one given in Scripture: the God-man Jesus dying for us on the cross. “We see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (Heb. 2:9). This

is the mystery of the Word made flesh, the God who became a real boy
for us. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy
Spirit. Amen.