

In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

This evening we contemplate one of the great mysteries of God:

the mystery of the human birth of the eternal Son of God.

We heard in this evening's Introit (taken from Psalm 2) the eternal declaration from God the Father,

You are My Son, TODAY I have begotten You.

How can the eternal Father beget the eternal Son... neither one having a beginning?

Our minds cannot fathom this simple and clear statement, because everything we see had a beginning.

One "non-day" there was nothing.

The next day, "**Day 1**," Genesis tells us, God created the heavens and the earth.

And in the following 5 regular 24 hours days, He ordered and filled it perfectly.

On day 6, God created man in His own image, meaning that our first parents had a perfect knowledge of God and were perfectly able to perform His will.

He knew God to be merciful and gracious; he knew God to be just and righteous.

Adam feared God, but he was not afraid of God, because Adam knew no sin.

Tonight, let us meditate on the blessing of "today," or "this day" as it is sometimes translated.

For time, too, is a creation and gift of God, one that is not good to be squandered or wasted.

And while we will spend most of our time this evening talking about "todays" gone by, it is so that we can make the most of our time today.

The First Meditation: St. Luke 2:10-12

And the angel said unto them, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born **this day** in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." (KJV)

The world was very different after the woman was deceived by the snake

and both she and Adam ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

As a result of his disobedience, the earth was plunged into corruption and death, and mankind is naturally conceived and born in sin.

Unlike Adam was made, we are not born in the image of God, but the image of sinful Adam.

We no longer have a perfect knowledge of God, nor are we naturally righteous.

It is just the opposite. We are conceived and born, hating and not knowing the one true Triune God and we cannot and do not do anything by nature except sin against Him.

But God had promised a way of escape. He promised that a Savior would come from woman's seed, who would to **crush the ancient serpent's head**; Genesis 3:15

For 1,000s of years, God's people had been waiting for this promise to be fulfilled, and finally an angel got to announce it on "**this day**" that the **Savior of all people** was born.

It might seem a little odd, that we do not know exactly what "**this day**" was on the calendar.

Surely, Mary remembered Jesus' birthday, but it is not recorded for us in Scripture.

So in her freedom, the Church has delighted to celebrate the annual festival on Dec. 24 and 25.

But the date is not the important thing, the truly important thing is that the eternal Son, who by nature is not confined to time or space, became capable of both,

taking on human flesh and blood to be permanently united to His own creation.
He came to restore God's image in us, to fulfill the Law of God that we could not,
and to atone for our sins by His bodily death upon a cross some 33 or so years later.

With this news of the Savior's birth, the angel joyfully announced that the shepherds were not to fear.
The angel did not come to condemn them, but to free them from sin's captivity,
and to go and behold their infant Savior.
They did not delay.
That very "today", after the angel chorus left them, **they made haste so see this thing...**
And they were blessed to behold Immanuel, God with us in the flesh.

Let us pray: Dear Savior, "Cast out our sin and enter in, Be born in us today." ^{ELH #137:4} **Amen.**

The Response: Hymn #123 | From Heaven Above to Earth I Come
Stanzas 1 – 5, 13

The Second Meditation St. Exodus 14:10-14

When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they feared greatly. And the people of Israel cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: 'Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." And Moses said to the people, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent." ^(ESV)

The "today" of this text was some 3,500 years ago.

It was a specific day — the "Day of Trouble."

After the 10th and final plague upon Egypt, called the Passover, Israel had walked out of bondage.
Pharaoh had urged them to leave, but now regretted it.
And so he drove after them with his world-class chariots to recapture them.

As this young nation lifted up their eyes, they beheld the forces of Egypt marching after them.
Their response was the same as we hear from new borns. They cried out.

They had yet to learn that they could trust the Lord, that they could plead to Him in faith
and that He would deliver them.

They had not yet learned that this was all part of His divine and gracious plan...
that everything is part of His divine and gracious plan.

And so they cry out, in frustration, "**It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians.**"

Is it any better with us today, 3,500 years later?

Do we not also give way to our fears, expressing our frustrations and faithless complaints,
murmuring rather than praying on the "day of trouble"?

We may chide the Israelites for their faithlessness, but we know the rest of their story.
Wouldn't they chide us for our cares and fears throughout this last year?

How often did your day of trouble include the visual of certain death with no way of escape?

Yet, the Lord is patient with His children and He commands,

"Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord that He will work for you today."

Everything is part of His divine and gracious plan, even the struggles you face.

Your enemies cannot overpower the Lord who fights for you.

You have only to silence your faithless doubts and fears,

and meditate on the full meaning of a Savior who has been born to you

and has already worked and accomplished your salvation through His death on the cross.

Let us pray: Dear Savior, *"Cast out our sin and enter in, Be born in us today."* ELH #137:4 **Amen.**

The Response: Hymn #90 | Savior of the Nations Come

5:00 PM – Women's Choir

11:00 PM – Congregation (*stanzas 1, 2, 4*)

The Third Meditation: St. Luke 4:16-22

And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as was His custom, He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and He stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to Him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me,

because He has anointed Me

to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent Me to proclaim liberty to the captives

and recovering of sight to the blind,

to set at liberty those who are oppressed,

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And He rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, **"Today** this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And all spoke well of Him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from His mouth. And they said, "Is not this Joseph's Son?" (ESV)

Early in Jesus' earthly ministry, He returned to his hometown of Nazareth.

The "today" of this text was the Sabbath Day, the "Day of Rest."

As was His custom, on this day, He gathered with the saints around God's Word.

It was His custom, taught to and modeled for Him by His faithful guardian/adoptive father, Joseph.

He was asked to read and expound the Scriptures on this particular "day of rest."

And we hear that **"all spoke well of Him and marveled at the gracious words**

that were coming from His mouth."

As He had done with Israel at the Red Sea, He **set at liberty those who are oppressed**,

proclaiming that He, the Christ, the Anointed One, had come **to proclaim the Lord's favor**,

to preach of forgiveness through His own atoning death.

And yet, some ask in derision **"Is not this Joseph's Son?"**

Their familiarity with Jesus, and with Joseph, hindered their hearing of these gracious words.

They did not find rest on this day, as they closed their ears and looked only with their blinded eyes.

Sometimes familiarity, breeds contempt in us.

The Word... the Sacraments... these look and sound so plain. We are so used to them.

Isn't this the same liturgy we have used for the last 130 years...500 years... 1,500 years...

Isn't that the same Christmas story I heard last year? I memorized that when I was a kid...

Never anything new...

But familiarity is also a blessing!

Familiarity helps to give rest. Young families know the blessings of a daily/weekly routine/custom.

The custom of gathering with God's people around God's Word and Sacraments.

The custom of a familiar and regular order such as that historically used by the Lutheran Church, which, always and without fail, gives the gracious Word of Christ, proclaiming God's favor to us poor sinful beings, week after week, year after year, century after century.

Thank God that we do not need to look for something new each year.

That it is the same story of our rest in Jesus, the Christ, over and over and over again.

Let us pray: Dear Savior, "Cast out our sin and enter in, Be born in us today." ELH #137:4 **Amen.**

The Response: Hymn #161 | O Jesus Christ, Thy Manger Is
Stanzas 1, 3, 4

The Fourth Meditation: St. Luke 19:1-10

He entered Jericho and was passing through. And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was about to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house **today**." So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. And when they saw it, they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." And Jesus said to him, "**Today** salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (ESV)

"Today" we take a 3 year step forward, to the end of Jesus' earthly ministry.

He is on His way to Jerusalem to suffer and die for sinners, and He has one more **to seek and save**.

Today is a "day of salvation."

By name, the Lord calls Zacchaeus to "**hurry and come down for I must stay at your house today**."

Joyfully Zacchaeus hurries down, but the crowd does not receive this well.

They grumble that Jesus would be a guest of a sinner,
that He would go to his home and eat and stay with him.

But Jesus is not ashamed of this.

Our heavenly Guest could not and would not do otherwise.

He made Himself at home with sinners

first in the womb of Mary, then in a manger in Bethlehem, then in Egypt, and up to Nazareth.

This was precisely the reason that He came: **to seek and to save the lost**.

And His salvation was not lost on Zaccaeus. It filled and changed his heart and mind.

Consider:

- ... How having an eternal paradise made certain to Him by the Lord,
he no longer is concerned about amassing this temporal world's earthly goods.
- ...How having been served by Jesus, he now desires to serve, rather than to be served.
- ...How being free from the god of mammon, his great earthly wealth is no longer his, but the Lord's...
a tool the Lord had given him by which he could provide for his family and serve his neighbor.
- ...How this response was not demanded of him, but freely offered to his Savior.

"Today" is the day when the Lord seeks sinners.

Every "today" is a new day of salvation, not just for those who are newly converted,
but also for those who have been in the Church since infancy.

Every "today" is a day for repentance and to hear His grace.

Every "today" is a day to joyfully respond to His gracious words and works.

Let us pray: Dear Savior, "Cast out our sin and enter in, Be born in us today." ^{ELH #137:4} **Amen.**

The Response: Hymn #126 | God Rest You Merry Gentlemen

The Fifth Meditation: St. Luke 23:39-43

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." And He said to him, "Truly, I say to you, **today** you will be with Me in paradise." ^(ESV)

"This day" is the "Day of Judgment"... at least for 3 people.

All three of them were judged guilty by human courts. All three were condemned to crucifixion.

At first, both of the criminals mocked Jesus, we are told;

but during the course of the day, one of them had a change in heart.

Perhaps his conscience was finally pricked, seeing Jesus' patient/perfect responses to the mocking.

Perhaps it was Jesus' prayer for forgiveness for those crucifying Him.

Perhaps he heard Jesus pray the Psalms from the cross and knew He was not an ordinary criminal.

Perhaps the lessons taught in Sabbath school were coming back to him,

lessons about Isaiah's suffering Servant, the Lamb led to slaughter, who opened not His mouth.

Regardless of what it was, in this 11th hour and 59th minute,

this criminal confessed His sins, saying that he was condemned **justly... receiving the due reward.**

And in the next breath, confessed his faith in Jesus, **This Man has done nothing wrong;**

...His condemnation before the human courts was unjust.

This day, though it is not a sweet and serene picture, is also part of our Christmas story,

for "this day" was the day for which Christ was born.

The Christmas prophet, Isaiah, tells us that this was all part of the Father's plan saying,

"Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush Him; He has put Him to grief;

when His soul makes an offering for guilt He shall see His offspring; He shall prolong His days;

The Son of God was conceived and born in human flesh so that He could die,
so that He would be **born under the Law to redeem those who were under the Law**, Galatians 4:5
and since **the wages of sin is death**, the redemption of sinners requires death. Romans 6:23
This, Jesus took on willingly, to fulfill His Father's gracious plan of salvation for you.

The confessing thief recognized the sacrifice. He recognized his King and Savior,
and begged for mercy, asking, "**Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.**"
To which Jesus replied, "**Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise.**"
This "today" was both, that day of judgment on the cross,
as well as the eternal day from which Jesus had come.
And that day, He took this child of Adam and child of God into His eternal kingdom and eternal rest.

For unto you [has died] this day [outside of another] city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

Let us pray: Dear Savior, "*Cast out our sin and enter in, Be born in us today.*" ELH #137:4 **Amen.**

The Response: Hymn #115 | All My Heart Sings and Rejoices
Stanzas 1, 2, 6, 10, 15

VI. The Sixth Meditation: Hebrews 3:12-15

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. As it is said,
"Today, if you hear His voice,
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." Ps. 95:7

This day is "today."

It was written long ago, but its truth, like all the truths we have heard this evening, are eternal truths.
For those living in this world, every day is a "Day of Trouble."

Like Pharaoh after the Israelites, the devil is always pursuing after you to return you to his bondage,
always trying, through deceitfulness and fear to harden your heart.

As the Lord rescued His people through the water of the Red Sea, baptizing them **into Moses,
in the cloud and in the sea**, 1 Corinthians 10:2

so the Lord has rescued you and made you one of His people through baptism,
by water and the Spirit, drowning the Old Adam that the **Spirit** may **give birth to spirit**. John 3:5

For those living in and by God's Word, every day is a "Day of Rest."

Though you might be tempted to think little of or, in the words of the catechism, to despise
that rest-giving Word, it is **the good news of great joy that is for all the people**.

It makes us to see our natural spiritual blindness by opening our eyes to our sin.

It frees us from the bondage of sin by proclaiming Christ's victory on the cross for us.

It liberates us who are captive to our guilt by pronouncing the Lord's favor and His forgiveness.

For those sinners looking to see Jesus, as Zacchaeus did, every day is a "Day of Salvation."

As Jesus has already set out to call you by name and stay with you.

He has come as our Immanuel, even today, to seek and to save such sinners,
and not only to visit, but to abide with you, and to eat with you.
In fact, even to give you His own body and blood born, crucified, and risen for you,
to forgive your rebellions against Him and to strengthen you against the temptations yet to come.

For those whose thoughts, words, and actions bring them under the condemnation of sin,
every day is a "Day of Judgment."

As the repentant criminal said, we are to **fear God**, who judges justly.

But in our fear of God, we need not be afraid of Him through our Savior, Jesus,
for as the same man found out, we have a merciful and gracious Judge who has judged the Christ,
your innocent King who **has borne the iniquity of us all**,^{Isaiah 53:6}
and was condemned in your place.

And in exchange for your sin, Jesus gives you His kingdom of life, eternal life,
to live with Him in His eternal "today."

**So take care, dear brother and sister, on this Christmas Day and every day,
as long as it is called "today,"** that you are not deceived or harden your heart,
for you have come to share in Christ, in His innocent life, His atoning death,
and His eternal kingdom.

A blessed and merry Christmas to all of you tonight... today.

Let us pray: Dear Savior, "*Cast out our sin and enter in, Be born in us today.*"^{ELH #137:4} **Amen.**

Soli Deo Gloria