

In Jesus' name. Amen.

People Loved by God,

At Christmas, we meditate on the mystery of the Word made flesh,

how the eternal, infinite Son of God assumed into His divine nature our human nature.

The Creed says it much more plainly, "*and became man.*"

But how much of a man?

Mary bore a human baby. The shepherds saw a human baby... and spread the word.

That baby boy was circumcised the 8th day.

Simeon held Him up in his arms as He was presented to God in the temple.

And today, we heard about the Wise Men coming and seeing the boy on His mother's lap,
as they bowed down and worshiped Him.

This is all to say how completely normal and natural Jesus appeared to other humans.

There was no nimbus (that aura of light emanating from around His holy head) that identified Him.

Those that knew who He was, had learned it from a special revelation from God.

And now during this season of Epiphany, our attention will turn to this special revelation,
to see in this humble, ordinary Man, the gracious Son of God, come to earth to save sinners.

In our text for meditation today, we have the very beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry
summarized by St. Matthew,

As follows in Jesus' name:

And leaving Nazareth He went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

"The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,

the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles –

the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light,

and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death,

on them a light has dawned."

(ESV)

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

This is Your Word, heavenly Father; sanctify us in the truth, Your Word is Truth. Amen. (John 17:17)

So we take a bit of a jump from the Wise Men's visit when Jesus was "two years of age or under" to the first months of Jesus' earthly ministry, after His baptism, after His temptation in the wilderness, and even after the arrest of St. John the Baptist.

In fact, St. Matthew indicates that it was St. John's arrest in the south (the land of Judea, mostly Jews), that that led Jesus to work in the north (the area around Galilee, many Gentiles).

And since our text speaks about the geography a bit, let's take the occasion to be reminded of some of the historic landscape, since Christ's ministry there brought faith and hope to these lands.

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Remember that the Kingdom of Israel was once a united kingdom made up of the 12 tribes of Israel.

Each tribe was the descendent of one of the original sons of Jacob (AKA: Israel).

When the Lord brought the Israelites out of Egypt and gave them the promised land,

each tribe received an allotment from God, land given them as their permanent inheritance.

Pertinent to our meditation now are the territories of the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali,

who were allotted land to the west of the Sea of Galilee.

In the days of Isaiah, the once united kingdom of Israel was divided:
the kingdom of Israel to the north (*with Zebulun and Naphtali*) and the kingdom of Judah to the south.
The northern Israelites never had a faithful king in all their history.

Their story is a sad one, as one king after another allowed and even promoted idolatry,
which led the people away from the temple in Jerusalem and, thus, away from the Lord.
Throughout the history of this northern kingdom, God had sent prophets to warn and call them back,
though often these prophets were met with defiance and scorn.

By the end of Isaiah's prophetic ministry, the Lord had sent the northern kingdom of Israel into exile.
As a whole, they would never return to the promised land.

And in their place, their captors, the Assyrians, brought in many other exiled nations
so that the area of the northern kingdom was filled with Gentiles, that is, non-Jews.
These peoples brought their own deities, their own religions, their own philosophies,
so that the shroud of darkness that had covered over the northern kingdom of Israel by their apostasy
was magnified all the more by the worldly and demonic religions of the nations brought in.

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Notice how the theme of darkness and light are so prevalent in this text and in the Epiphany theme.

Isaiah spoke of this post-Israelite land filled with Gentiles as
the people dwelling in darkness ... and... those dwelling in the region and shadow of death.
This darkness is a dangerous darkness... it is not an innocent, harmless darkness,
but it is a spiritual death that separates you from God,
and thus separates you from life, from spiritual and eternal life.

It is good for us to recognize this because this spiritual darkness is our natural state.

It is where, in one sense, we feel the most comfortable.

It's where we like to keep our sins... hidden in the dark, unseen/unknown by others.

The thoughts of your minds, the lusts, the covetousness, the hatred, the doubts, and the fears...

Even our actions, we try to hide under the cover of darkness,

as St. Paul pointed out, **those who get drunk, are drunk at night.** ^{1 Thes. 5:7}

And perhaps you have heard the saying, "Nothing good ever happens after 10 PM."

The illusion of the cover of darkness helps us to imagine that no one else can see our deep, dark secrets.

But are things done in secret or in darkness hidden from God?

Are the thoughts of your mind unknown to Him?

Are words whispered unheard by God?

Sometimes, we can be like infants playing peek-a-boo,

who believe that when they close their eyes, nobody else can see them.

But realize that this spiritual darkness is only one-sided.

God can see all things. Nothing is hidden from Him.

What the conscience is ashamed of, it tries to hide in darkness, just as Adam initially tried to hide
in the shadows of the garden when the Lord came to speak with him.

And yet in the cases of both Adam and the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali,

the Lord did not desire that they should remain in this **darkness... in the shadow of death.**

And so He came to them and revealed Himself, the almighty and enlightening Word.

Notice how He dealt with them:

First He exposed to the light what He could clearly see.

They had to answer to His enlightening Word.

With Adam, He asked questions, **“Where are you?... Who told you you were naked?**

Have you eaten from the tree...?”

With the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, He said, **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”**

“Repent, for His kingdom of Grace is here...”

Note that He shines His light upon them, not because He hates them and wants them to suffer, but so that He might lead them **out of their darkness and into His marvelous light.**

He pulls the fingers back from their eyes to see their sin and to acknowledge it before Him,

And as they open their eyes, not only do they see their sin, but they see their Savior before them.

At the same time, they can see both their need for a Savior and the redemption won.

In Him they see that **God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all.** ^{1 John 1:5}

Dear fellow redeemed,

This is what the Lord continues to do still today. He continues to come to us to preach,

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

You cannot hide yourself under the cover of darkness; nor can you hide your sins from Him.

Why continue to carry the burden of guilt and shame with you?

Instead, He calls you to confess and turn from your hatred, your covetousness, your lust, your drunkenness, your doubt and fears... every one of your sins,

and to look upon Him, the Lamb who has suffered and died under the darkness of God's wrath,

to see in Him all God's judgement poured out and endured, to save and protect His people.

He is the Lamb of Revelation standing, as though it had been slain, yet behold He lives.

[God] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom

of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. ^{Colossians 1:13-14}

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Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could see a glowing nimbus whenever God were near?

But as with the Mary and Joseph, with the shepherds, with Simeon, and with the wise men,

He directs us to His holy and enlightening Word.

The Lord has chosen to reveal Himself in a far more common way,

exercising our faith that we would trust His Word, rather than our dim eyesight.

The kingdom of heaven is at hand,

He is near us with His grace whenever God's Word and Sacraments are present.

As baptized children of God, **you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,**

a people for His own possession,

that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness

into His marvelous light. ^{1 Peter 2:9}

Each week He reveals Himself to you and walks among you and calls you once again

to be and remain a partaker of His kingdom of grace and glory.

Thanks be to God!

In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Soli Deo Gloria