**The Sacramental Nativity**

Based on [Luke 2:1-20](https://biblia.com/books/esv/Lk2.1-20)

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You just heard read the Gospel of Jesus’ birth. What do you imagine when you think of Jesus birth? Cattle lowing, hay, a donkey that Mary might have rode in on, all in a stable. There’s even a Christmas song about a stable dog who was imagined present for artistic purposes. Though it is picturesque, none of that stuff is in the bible. These details are added to help us picture, sentimentally, the birth of Christ.

What is told the bible is that when the time came for Jesus’ birth he was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. The stable and animals, hay, that is all inferred from the manger. To form a picture of it in our minds we have to add details--but the evangelist doesn’t really seem to be painting us a picture. Because the only details he includes about the moment of baby Jesus being born into the world are simply swaddling clothes and being laid in a manger.

The Bible doesn’t give you the full picture of the Nativity you have in your head; it only gives you the signs. Why? Because these two signs were how the shepherds were told to find the Christ the Lord.

God still sends messengers with signs of where to find Christ the Lord. Angels once told shepherds to look for him in swaddling clothes and a manger; today preachers tell God’s flock where to look for Jesus, and the signs by which you will recognize him. It’s not in swaddling clothes and a manger, it’s not in a Christmas crèche in your front lawn. It is not in presents under the tree. It’s not in carving the Christmas goose or getting together with the family for dinner. For the world today, the Sacraments of Holy baptism and holy communion, these *Sacraments* are signs by which lowly sheep find Christ the Lord today. There’s a tendency to look at the birth of Christ picturesquely, sentimentally. It would invite you to look at his birth sacramentally.

A sacrament is defined in this way: it is a sacred act 1. Instituted by God, 2. in which God Himself has joined His Word of promise to a visible element, and 3. by which he offers, gives, and seals the forgiveness of sins. Consider how Jesus fits that description. A sacrament is a 1. sacred, 2. tangible, 3. gift of forgiveness, from God. Jesus was born into the world as a sacrament.

His birth was a sacred act instituted by God. “Behold, you [Mary] will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus…” In that sacred act God Himself has joined His Word of promise to a something tangible; as John writes, “And the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us.” And in the birth of his son Him he offers, gives, and seals the forgiveness of sins. As the angels sing about Him, Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth.”

Jesus is a sacrament to his people on earth from the moment he was born. Now let’s look again at the attendant signs, this sacramental baby was wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

The first sign is the swaddling clothes. A baby is immediately swaddled in order to simulate the security of the womb. But sacramentally, the swaddling of Jesus can suggest much more. This child is the son of God, who not only took on our humanity, but also our sins. He was clothed in our sins, so that we might be clothed in his righteousness. This happens sacramentally through Holy Baptism. Galatians 2:27 says “**For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ**.”

The second sign is the manger. The manger serves as a cradle, and this manger was located in Bethlehem is the birthplace of King David. A manger is a food trough for animals, and the name Bethlehem, means “house of bread”. These details allow us to confess this: God’s gift to the world--His only begotten son--He foreordained to have placed in a food trough in the house of bread.

And what is also true is, when God’s son grew to manhood, and began his ministry of reconciliation he said, “**I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh**.” These words of Jesus were recorded by John the evangelist. And the other evangelists, Matthew, Mark Luke, record Jesus’ words on the night when he was betrayed, he took ***bread*** and gave it to his disciples and said “this is my body given for you.”

God always gives signs to direct his people to him. God signaled the shepherds to look for the gift of his Word wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Some 2000 years later, God signals his sheep to look for the gift of his Word combined with water, and under bread and wine.

Jesus is still with his church, and he gives these signs, marks that let his little ones know where he is to be found. Every time there is a baptism, Jesus wraps that child of God in himself, and holds him tightly and securely. You will find Jesus wrapping that child in his own swaddling clothes of salvation. Every time Holy Communion is celebrated, angels and archangels attend in glory as Jesus is found in the food of bread and wine. You will find Jesus lying in a vessel for food as a peace offering to you.

When He came into our world, Jesus was wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, when he leaves this world he is wrapped in burial cloths and laid in a tomb. Do not just imagine these things sentimentally; understand Christmas sacramentally. Jesus was born to die, born to give his life as a ransom for you. He entered our world as a peace offering **from God to us**; he left this world as a sin offering **to God for us**. As he first came into the world with sacramental signs, he continues to return in sacramental signs. This is what we are here to celebrate “Christ-mass” literally…the Mass of Christ.