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The Sermon and the Propers

By FRED H. LINDEMANN

THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD

CHRISTMAS, that is, the Mass of Christ's Day, is the only feast of the year for which our rite appoints two services and provides two sets of Propers. The set of Propers for the Early Service has been spoken of as historic, the set for the Later Service as dogmatic. Whether we find it convenient or not, the fact remains that both sets are appointed for The Communion. In many churches the Holy Sacrament is celebrated only in one or the other, though the respective Propers are used in each service. Some churches have eliminated the Holy Communion entirely on Christmas Day. The reason is said to be that the members and children and visitors attend in unusual numbers and that the visiting nonmembers do not wish to sit idly in the pews while the members are communicated. For the sake of people who attend once or twice during the year, God's saints are deprived of the Holy Sacrament! A far simpler solution would be to arrange a special program for all who even at Christmas are in a hurry. In such a special program the choirs may sing to their hearts' content, the organist play interminably, the pastor limit his ministry to a brief reading and a short prayer. A ceremony of candlelighting may be performed. In fact, any and every sentimental prettiness, observed in churches that have no Holy Sacrament, may be imitated. This should satisfy the nonchurched and induce them to come again on Easter. But the services appointed by the Church, the Holy Communion with its own set of Propers, is chiefly for the faithful. The Feast of the Holy Nativity is not an occasion to deprive the faithful of the Holy Communion for the sake of the infrequent visitor. If the number of communicants is large, the celebration in both services is the partial answer.

THE PROPERS FOR THE EARLY SERVICE

The church prepared for the commemoration of our Lord's Nativity not only during the season of Advent but also with solemn services on the day before the feast, especially in the evening of that day. The faithful gathered in the church, passed the hours

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in song and prayer, listened to homilies, and so watched for the coming of the great day. As midnight struck, they burst forth in the song of joy, the first Introit of the day.

The Introit. — "The Lord hath said unto Me, Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee. The Lord reigneth, He is clothed with majesty; the Lord is clothed with strength, wherewith He hath girded Himself."

This is the traditional Introit at the Midnight Eucharist. It reminds us of the Word's birth or generation by the Father in eternity.

The Collect. — "O God, who hast made this most holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light, grant, we beseech Thee, that as we have known on earth the mysteries of that Light, we may also come to the fulness of His joys in heaven."

The language clearly indicates the hour when this prayer was used: "this most holy night." Christmas is a feast of light. Its date was chosen that it might supplant and give some Christian meaning to the feast of the unconquered sun-god (*sol invictus*). Christ is the true God of the Sun, who overcomes the darkness of sin. His birthday is quite appropriately commemorated at the time when the sun begins his return. This idea of light overcoming darkness has found expression in the lighted tree. It runs through the fabric of the day's Provers like a golden thread.

The Epistle (Titus 2:11-14 or Is. 9:2-7). — The first presents the purpose of Christ's appearing, the message of His coming, and the life He demands of mankind. The second presented difficulties in the translation of the Authorized Version, and preachers hesitated to give the necessary and lengthy textual explanations on this day. For instance, the Authorized Version said in the third verse: "Thou hast multiplied the nation, and not increased the joy." Yet the next words were: "They joy before Thee according to the joy of harvest." The Revised Standard Version drops the "not" and reads: "Thou hast increased its joy." The fifth verse is made clearer also. This may encourage the choice of this Epistle as text. Beginning with the sixth verse, it offers an excellent basis for a sermon on "Our Glorious Christmas Gift," showing who and whose He is.

The Gradual. — "Thy people shall be willing in the day of Thy power, in the beauties of holiness from the womb of the morning.

The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit Thou at My right hand, until I make Thine enemies Thy footstool. Alleluia! Alleluia! The Lord hath said unto Me, Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee. Alleluia!"

The Revised Standard Version renders Psalm 110:3 thus: "Your people will offer themselves freely on the day you lead your host upon the holy mountain (*or* in holy array). From the womb of the morning like dew your youth (*or* the dew of your youth) will come to you."

The Proper Sentence. — "Alleluia! Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad before the Lord, for He hath made known His salvation. Alleluia!"

The Gospel (St. Luke 2:1-14). — From the wide variety of subjects suggested by the narrative of the birth the preacher must choose one that is in harmony with the Propers. The idea of the Light dispelling darkness is presented in the Collect and in the Epistle from Isaiah. In the holy Gospel the shepherds keep watch by night, and the glory of the Lord shines round about them. This may suggest that Christ's birth illumines the world's dark ignorance concerning our fate, ourselves, and the future. However, the great thought of the Early Service is announced in the opening sentence of the Introit and repeated in the Gradual. The Child of Bethlehem is the eternally begotten Word of the Father. The manhood was taken into God. The angel declared that the Babe is Christ the Lord. In the Epistle the Child born of the Virgin is called Mighty God, Everlasting Father. This would suggest a sermon on the Union of the Two Natures in Christ.

The Proper Preface. — "For in the mystery of the Word made flesh, Thou hast given us a new revelation of Thy glory, that, seeing Thee in the Person of Thy Son, we may be drawn to the love of those things which are not seen."

THE PROPERS FOR THE LATER SERVICE

The ancient church had to contend with the attractions and customs of the pagan world just as we today must combat the secularization of Christmas. The second set of Propers emphasizes that the Christians are not to be carried away with the world's use

of Christmas, making it a holiday instead of a holy day. We need to have the wondrous story told in its full import, in its application to the entire man. The old fathers took the message "Unto you is born this day a Savior, who is Christ the Lord," as found in the Propers, and developed this text into the mightiest festival sermon.

The Introit. — "Unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder. And His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Oh, sing unto the Lord a new song, for He hath done marvelous things."

The Collect. — "Grant, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, that the new birth of Thine only-begotten Son in the flesh may set us free who are held in the old bondage under the yoke of sin."

This prayer strikes a quietly sober note in the midst of this holy day's great joy. The church could pray for many things. Her greatest desire, no doubt, would be to take up the song of glory and pour it forth in adoration and thanksgiving. But in deep quietness of heart she finds the very center of her Lord's coming into the flesh and carries this in her festival prayer to the Giver of the divine Gift. Note the contrasts, "the new birth" and "the old bondage," "free" and "bondage under the yoke of sin."

The Epistle. — If Titus 2:11-14 was used at the earlier service, Is. 9:2-7 may be used at this service. Anciently the Epistle at this service was Heb. 1:1-12.

The Gradual. — "All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth. The Lord hath made known His salvation. His righteousness hath He openly showed in the sight of the heathen. Alleluia! Alleluia! Oh, come, let us sing unto the Lord! Let us worship and bow down before Him. Alleluia!"

The Proper Sentence. — "Alleluia! Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad before the Lord, for He hath made known His salvation."

The Gospel. — Although the only Gospel authorized by our rite is Luke 2:1-14, it may be noted here that the ancient Gospel for the late service was John 1:1-14. The traditional lessons for the Later Service describe Christ's relation to God. In the Epistle He

is the Son, in the holy Gospel He is the Word. There is no inconsistency, for the Epistle states that God spoke to us by the Son, who is, therefore, the Word, and in the holy Gospel John describes the Word as the "only Son from the Father." This Word was the Light of men. There is also the element of the witness-bearing church. "We have beheld His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father." Christ's real relation to God no human comparison can fully exhaust. "The Son" seems to express distinction of Person and "the Word" unity of substance.

The Proper Preface.— "For in the mystery of the Word made flesh, Thou hast given us a new revelation of Thy glory, that, seeing Thee in the Person of Thy Son, we may be drawn to the love of those things which are not seen."

OUTLINE FOR SERMON ON HEBREWS 1:1-12

"The Son of God"

A. *Previous Revelations.*— God had previously made His will known to man "in many and various ways." His revelation had been progressive, increasing by slow degrees in clearness and fullness. The various ways included visions, appearances, mysterious types, appointment of sacrifices, giving of the Law, the institution of a system of worship, and the direct inspiration of the prophets.

B. *The Final Revelation.*— The Christian revelation is not progressive but final, not distributed into various channels but concentrated in one Person. Of this Person the Epistle teaches us:

1. *His Relation to the Father.*— He is "a Son." God said to Him, "Thou art My Son." He is the Father's Son as no other is or can be. He is not only "of God," but "God out of God." "He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of His nature." He is not only "Light," but "Light out of Light," a breaking forth of that Light which God is. He is "very God out of very God." Others could reveal God by what they said, He alone by what He did and was.

2. *His Relation to the World.*— "Through whom He created the world." To creation He was the Source of its existence. "Upholding the universe by His word of power." In Him dwells the power by which all things are held in being and freshness.

He is the Renewer as well as the Creator of nature's beauties, "whom [God] appointed the heir of all things," Possessor and Lord. From Him all things came, and to Him all things tend.

3. *His Relation to the Angels.* — His position is far above theirs. He possesses eternal sonship. "Let all the angels of God worship Him." He inherited eternal kingship, "a throne forever and ever," and wields a scepter of righteousness. "God has anointed Thee with the oil of gladness beyond Thy comrades." He enjoys eternal bliss, being not only the King of Glory but the King of Gladness and Joy. Saints and angels indeed taste of this joy, but He was anointed with the oil of gladness above them all that He might make "purification for sins," for He is the Author and Finisher. Eternal being is His, and "Thy years will never end." "Thou art the same." He shall remain when this world shall have passed away.

OUTLINE FOR SERMON ON THE TRADITIONAL HOLY GOSPEL FOR THE LATER SERVICE

"The Word of God"

A. *The Preincarnate Word.* — As in the traditional Epistle, we see:

1. *His Relation to God.* — He shares the eternity of God, His most intimate Presence, His very nature.

2. *His Relation to Creation.* — "All things were made through Him." He is also nature's constant Sustainer. See marginal note of Revised Version.

3. *His Relation to the World of Men.* — He was the invisible Head of the old dispensation, the Light in its darkness, ever shining, though unrecognized, and then, as now, the sole Source of salvation and life.

4. *His Relation to Previous Revelations.* — These are summed up in the person of the forerunner, the greatest of the prophets. John and the prophets were not the light, but they came to bear witness that the true Light was on the way, to point men to the dawn, and to show them that "the true Light that enlightens every man was coming into the world," yes, was already present in the world, which was made by Him, though it knew Him not.

B. *The Incarnate Word.* — Reference to the Incarnation seems

to begin with the words, "He came to His own home, and His own people received Him not." We learn:

1. *The Purpose of the Incarnation.*—The Son came to make us sons. John here gives the teaching of St. Paul in a single sentence. "He gave power to become children of God." In Holy Baptism we are adopted into God's family. It is God's purpose that we become children in the fullest sense of likeness to our heavenly Father.

2. *The Facts of the Incarnation.*—"The Word became flesh," took man's nature, and in that nature "dwelt among us," not merely as God dwelt in the material tabernacle, for that was never in any sense one with its glorious Inmate. Here the tabernacle of the humanity was inseparably one with the Divinity dwelling within.

3. *The Witness of the Incarnation.*—This witness is supplied by men who themselves saw the glory of the Divine Shekinah visible through the veil of human flesh, in beauty of character, blamelessness of wisdom and conduct, unearthliness of teaching, and in the divine power and winsomeness of His miracles. "Full of grace and truth." Such divine fullness of beauty and convincing reality could exist only in One who bore a unique relation to the Father, only in the only-begotten Son.

THE HOLY COMMUNION

Whenever we are permitted to celebrate another Christmas, God confers a special favor on us by granting us to look into His fatherly heart. The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared. The grace of God is His kindness and benevolent disposition toward the sinner. On earth peace to the men of God's good will. This grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men. In the birth of the Christ Child, God revealed to all sinners how He feels toward them. This Child was born for all men. He is to save all without exception. As the sun shines on all, so God's sun of grace is to shine on all in Christ Jesus. Of course, he who is too proud or ashamed to acknowledge his sinfulness and helplessness, he who strives to be righteous before God by virtue of his own efforts, receives no grace. This is only for people who have nothing to bring before God. But all who come to the

Child in the manger with the conviction that nowhere but in Him alone there is help and salvation — they find grace. The lowliness and poverty of the Babe are nothing but our guilt and misery, which He has taken upon Himself. On Him it remains. In all eternity it shall not touch us.

This we must believe with all our heart when we come to the Lord's Table to be united with our Savior. We are sinners and have accumulated a great debt before God, but this Child was born to take away all our guilt and suffer our punishment. God became man that He might be able to die for the sins of the whole world. The body He took from the Virgin He gave for all on the Cross, the very body He gives us in the Holy Sacrament today. The blood He shed for us He gives us together with the wine, to assure us that He came into this world also for us, that He died to pay our debts. By giving us His body and blood, together with the bread and wine, He declares that we, too, are reconciled with God, that we, too, are men of God's good will. He has put all His grace into the Holy Sacrament so that sinners need not search for it long but have it close at hand always.

Our very presence at the Lord's Table is a declaration on our part that we believe this doctrine. As often as we eat and drink in remembrance of Him we proclaim the Lord's death. By our eating and drinking we declare: "He became man and gave Himself for me that He might redeem me from all iniquity. I renounce irreligion and worldly passions, awaiting my blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of my great God and Savior Jesus Christ."

Blessed are all who may receive the Holy Sacrament and so declare their confident faith in the grace of God that has appeared to all men. Come, then, as pardoned and redeemed sinners and faithfully lay hold on forgiveness and grace. Then it will be truly Christmas. Then the glory of the Lord will shine in your hearts, the dark night of sin will be banished, and as happy children of the heavenly Father you may look for the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.

THE SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

In some years this Sunday within the octave of Christmas is not observed, as when the Circumcision falls on a Sunday. However,

provision has been made for it with a full set of Propers. Apparently it is not expected to contribute a very important part to the building of the year, yet there are important lessons to be brought home, and the testimony of this Sunday is needed, not to strengthen but to complete.

The Introit. — "Thy testimonies are very sure; holiness becometh Thine house, O Lord, forever. Thy throne is established of old; Thou art from everlasting. The Lord reigneth, He is clothed with majesty; the Lord is clothed with strength, wherewith He hath girded Himself."

The Lord's decrees are very sure. He has decreed that we are to be heirs of God through Christ. The way to this goal leads through repentance and the Law. The birth for us is to be the birth of Christ in us. Holiness befits God's house and sons of God. We are to be free from the bondage of the Law, to live as it befits heirs of God through Christ.

The Collect. — "Almighty and Everlasting God, direct our actions according to Thy good pleasure, that in the name of Thy beloved Son, we may be made to abound in good works; through the same, etc."

This prayer suggests the holy lives of Simeon and Anna, faithful examples of devotion even under the Law. But at the end of the holy Gospel we read of the growth of the holy Babe into the manhood that later received the Father's commendation, "In whom I am well pleased." Here we find the source of the petition that the Father direct our actions according to His good pleasure, that in our lives we may abound more and more in good works.

This Sunday is the last of the civil year. The church does not stress New Year's Day. Actually, this is foreign to her year and purpose. But in the early days of the church, this time of the year was given over to celebrations of heathen customs in connection with the ending of the old and the beginning of the new year. Certain gods and goddesses were invoked, the people thronged their shrines. With the carnival spirit prevailing, revolting excesses became very common. The Christians who had been converted from heathenism and lived in this pagan atmosphere were tempted to relapse into the old customs and to participate in the festivities. The church endeavored to counteract the attractions and tempta-

tions by offering other observances. The Vigils, the Early and Later Services, the days of St. Stephen and St. John and the Holy Innocents were designed to pre-empt the attention of the Christians. But the lure to pleasure and excess made itself felt even within the fold. Therefore the church entitled the Mass of this day "the Mass for the Redemption from the Worship of Idols." This day's Collect was appointed for that Mass. At a much later date, attention tended to turn to this Sunday as a sort of "Old Year's Day." The modern Christians, too, must live in a world that observes the end and the beginning of the civil year with pagan customs and excesses and are apt to yield too much to the spirit of the season. Therefore, more and more, this Sunday is observed with a looking forward into the new year. The Collect is particularly pertinent, as are some parts of the holy Gospel.

The Epistle (Gal. 4:1-7).— Many see in Christ the "holy Infant so tender and mild" and celebrate Christmas before a decorated tree and a profusion of gifts. They see romance in the stable, the manger, and the poverty of Bethlehem. Others prefer to view the Babe as the future Man of Sorrows, who by obedience and self-abasement brought men out of the misery of sin. Still others see in Him only a wise teacher or an extraordinarily noble person. But we have arrived at a better understanding of the poverty and humbleness of the birth. "Though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor so that by His poverty you might become rich." St. Athanasius wrote: "God was made man that man might become God." He is ever the same, as Infant, as King, at Easter, at the Ascension, or at His last coming: the Crucified. As we stand at the manger, we see the cross looming behind it. In the tender hands of the Babe we see the wounds of the crucifixion.

The Gradual.— "Thou art fairer than the children of men; grace is poured into Thy lips. My heart is inditing a good matter, I speak of the things which I have made touching the King; my tongue is the pen of a ready writer. Alleluia! Alleluia! The Lord reigneth, He is clothed with majesty; the Lord is clothed with strength, wherewith He hath girded Himself. Alleluia!"

The Proper Sentence.— "Alleluia! Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad before the Lord; for He hath made known His salvation. Alleluia!"

The Gospel (St. Luke 2:33-40). — Somewhat reluctantly our thoughts travel to the scene pictured in the holy Gospel. Forty days after the birth, Mary's child is presented in the temple. Simeon takes the infant in his arms and blesses God for the grace of being permitted to see the Redeemer before his death. Now he is ready and glad to depart this life. Then he becomes very serious, for as a prophet he looks into the future, thirty-three years hence. There he beholds an appalling sight. The child he holds in his arms is a grown man, the Redeemer of the world. Yet His own people, whose glory He was destined to be, have rejected Him and delivered Him to the heathen, to whom He is destined to be a Light. A cruel deed has been perpetrated. Three crosses are set upon a hill, two holding each a robber, the one in the middle bearing the onetime Child of Bethlehem, the innocent Son of God. There He hangs, helpless and naked, His hands and feet pierced with nails, consumed with thirst, covered with blood, forsaken by His heavenly Father. The sun has hidden its light at the sight. Below the cross stands the woman who on the Holy Night carefully tended the infant. Simeon utters the prophetic words: "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed."

Why does the church ask us to meditate on these sad thoughts while still within sight of the manger? Surely, she wishes us to celebrate a joyous and happy Christmas. Yet she introduced the account of the holy Gospel to remind us that Christmas is not sheer poetry. Our Lord's birth marks the beginning of a hard and bitter life for the Redeemer. We must view this life as a whole, as a sacrifice of humiliation that is crowned by His death on the cross. Christ's entire life on earth, from birth to death, was a horrible abasement and deprivation. It was the price of our salvation. We must bear this in mind if we are to understand His birth in the stable. His entire life was a sacrifice. His birth was the beginning of His redemptive sacrifice that reached its climax in His death. Crib and cross are the boundaries that enclose His life of sacrifice.

The Proper Preface.— "For in the mystery of the Word made flesh, Thou hast given us a new revelation of Thy glory, that seeing Thee in the person of Thy Son, we may be drawn to the love of those things which are not seen."

REFLECTIONS ON THE EPISTLE

The Epistle asks us to reflect on the sublime thought of our supernatural elevation. Why did Christ become a little child and endure so many things? The Epistle opens with a picture from everyday life. A rich man, a king, dies and leaves his whole estate to a minor son. So long as the heir is still a child, he has no right to administer the property but remains under obedience of his guardian and tutor. In no respect does he visibly differ from an inferior. He is obliged to ask for everything and to thank for all that is done for him. But as soon as he has reached man's estate, he becomes lord and ruler. Here St. Paul compares the old Law with the new Law. Under the old covenant, the people were already heirs of the promised Redemption, but they remained minors, without the right to administer the benefits of salvation, for they were still servants in God's eyes. At the coming of Christ all this was changed. "When the time had fully come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, to redeem those who were under the Law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." Through Christ's birth we were made children of God. We are no longer servants as in the Old Testament. Instead we are the beloved children. For this Child willed to become a child that we might know we are the children of God.

One of the mysteries of sanctifying grace is that it brings us into closest union with the blessed Trinity. The Holy Spirit comes upon us and lives in us, making body and soul the temple of His glory. Through the gracious operation of the Holy Spirit we become members of Christ and brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus. He abides in us and we in Him. The Holy Spirit leads us also to the Father and makes us beloved children. Adopted children have blood that is different from that of their parents, but God's adopted children are truly His children, since they are made partakers of the divine nature through grace.

OUTLINE FOR SERMON ON THE EPISTLE

This day is really not the Sunday after Christmas but the Sunday after Christmas Day, for the great Christmas truth is still before us. Having considered the Incarnation, we now learn its meaning. We pass from the God-ward view to the man-ward view, the truth of the Incarnation as it affects our relation to God.

The Meaning of the Incarnation

A. *Man's Position Before the Incarnation.*—The human race was then in its minority. This was true also of the chosen people, who, though heirs of God, were still treated as children and expected to obey as servants. Their position was preparatory, "until the date set by the father." They were not as yet capable of freedom but were under "guardians and trustees." They were learning elementary lessons, lessons pertaining to life in this world, and lessons very hard and burdensome, for they were "slaves."

B. *The Time of the Incarnation.*—Christ's coming took place at the time fixed and appointed in God's eternal decrees. He came at the time determined in ancient prophecy, when the kingly power had passed from Judah and while the second temple was still standing. It took place at the time most suitable, when the world had learned that it was hopeless to think of improving the human race by means of any of the religions or philosophies then existing; when all was ready for the diffusion of a world creed, and the Roman Empire by its arms and laws had paved the road for the messengers of the King of Kings.

C. *The Truth of the Incarnation.*—"God sent forth His Son." This Son was pre-existent. He was before He was sent. He was divine, for He was with God before He was sent from God. "Born of a woman." He was human. No reference may be intended here to His supernatural conception, but only to His birth as man. "Born under the Law." He accepted the position of those He came to save. He came to share not only our humanity but our inferiority. He accepted as man the relation in which He found men standing toward God, even though this relation had been caused by sin. God's children had become merely servants, so

Christ took upon Himself the form of a servant. Though without sin, He accepted the low estate to which sin had brought us.

D. *The Purpose and Result of the Incarnation.*—Christ acquiesced in our condition and assumed our relation toward God, but only in order that He might alter this relation by "redeeming those who were under the Law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." This new relationship to God came by the incarnation of our brother man, the Lord from heaven, through brotherhood with whom we receive the adoption. Nor is this change merely nominal. With our position is given the power to gain a new disposition, with our new relation is given the power to acquire a new feeling of kinship with God. "Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts," to enable us to realize and act out our adoption. It is not because we are spiritual that we are made sons, but it is because we are sons that we receive the assistance of the Spirit. As many as are led by the Spirit become sons of God in the fullest meaning of the word and shall in due time, as heirs of God, enter into perfect communion with God. This is the final goal of the Incarnation.

OUTLINE FOR SERMON ON THE HOLY GOSPEL

There is something melancholy about the Sunday after Christmas: we feel as the shepherds must have felt when the angels left them again and when instead of heavenly glory darkness surrounded them. Yet has the coming and going of Christmas had no lasting effect whatever? Has it been void of all blessing? In the year that lies ahead we shall hear how our Lord accomplished the great work of redemption and reconciliation that brought Him down to earth. What stand shall we take over against this Gospel? Accept the Lord Jesus as Savior and follow Him with trusting, loving heart? Permit Him to rule our life? Trust solely in His merit to make us acceptable in God's sight? Or refuse to acknowledge Him as our Lord and King? Put hope for salvation and God's favor in our own worthiness and moral excellence? We must take a stand. We cannot compromise. Either we are with Him heart and soul, or we are against Him. There is no third stand we may take. In the kingdom of God there is no neutrality.

*How the Thoughts Out of Many Hearts Are Revealed
Through Christ*

A. He Is Set for the Fall of Many.—Mary and Joseph had heard wonderful things concerning their child. Now Simeon's prophecy. They must have marveled at the words of the aged man. They were not to entertain false hopes, not to be led to think that their son's career will be glorious before the world. Many in Israel will be offended in him, reject him, and fall. Is. 8:14, 15.

The truth of this prophecy was soon realized. King Herod attempted to kill the young child. Later Christ experienced opposition from Herod the Tetrarch, Pilate, the Pharisees, the scribes, the Sadducees. As He hung on the cross, He was mocked and derided. After the resurrection the apostles were forbidden even to speak of the Lord, were persecuted and killed. Also to the Gentiles He was a stone of stumbling. Wherever this sign was held aloft, it was spoken against. So it has continued to the present day. The great majority does not accept Christ as the Savior, as the Son of God who became man to make men heirs of God. It humbles man's pride to admit that he is utterly helpless and that help must come from the outside. Simeon says that this is not an unforeseen development. God planned it so. "Behold, this child is set for the fall of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against." God set Jesus, intended Him to be a stone of stumbling. His purpose was to confound the self-righteousness and wisdom of the world.

B. He is Set for the Rising of Many.—Isaiah once pictured how the Lord enters into judgment with penitent sinners (Is. 1:18). God is both plaintiff and judge. Heaven and earth are the witnesses called upon to testify that in spite of God's countless blessings His people have turned from Him. The guilt is established beyond a doubt. The people must confess that they deserve God's wrath and punishment. What is the sentence of the Judge? "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool." Why this gracious sentence? Because the child in Simeon's arms brings righteousness to all who accept him as their only hope of salvation. To him who despairs of self, this child is a rock for his rising again, which he grasps with the hands of faith and on which

he draws himself up out of the black waters of sin and hopelessness. And so he is saved from eternal death. This happens wherever the sign of the Cross is held on high. Many accept, rise, and live. The shepherds, Simeon, the Magi, the prophetess Anna accepted the Christ Child. Many loyal souls followed Him in faith and love even to a martyr's death. Preachers of the Cross turned the world upside down. To this day Christ is a stone for the rising of many, who despair of their own efforts, build their trust on Christ, accept Him as their Lord and King, and serve Him in love and devotion.

The Christ Child came to be the Servant of servants, and His followers must be servants of their fellow men. There is one service each can render. Anna, at 84 years, could have argued that there was nothing more for her to do. But no sooner had she seen the Christ than she began to speak of the Savior to all who were looking for redemption in Jerusalem. Into her own little world she brought the hope of salvation. If Christmas means more than a round of buying and selling, we shall speak of the deliverance Christ brought to all who look for redemption. Our witness shall not be in vain. May then the coming year echo and re-echo our Bethlehem experience.

THE HOLY COMMUNION

The thoughts of our hearts also are revealed by our attitude toward the Christ Child. We make our decision clear today by our appearance at the Lord's Table. By eating and drinking in remembrance of Him we declare: "I believe that for me He gave His body into death, for me He shed His blood that I may have forgiveness, life, and blessedness."

But we must not think that we have met all requirements by professing our faith in His salvation. Are we to be just ornaments? Are we so vain as to imagine that we add a note of exquisite dignity and charm? We know that we are in Christ's kingdom to serve Him. We can render Him no service directly, for He needs nothing. We may serve Him by serving our fellow men for His sake. We have been baptized. Whom have we brought to Holy Baptism? We have been confirmed in the faith by constant instruction. Whom have we instructed or brought to be taught? We are united with our Lord in the Holy Communion. Whom have we helped to restore to their Communion? We have the

sign of the holy cross on our forehead from Holy Baptism. How far have we driven that cross into our social relationships, our business, our school life? How far have we carried it into our community, impressed it on our environment, stamped it into our lives?

Into His face we look, as we kneel before Him in Holy Communion, and pray: "Lord Jesus, I have resolved afresh to be Thy follower and servant. Make me a better follower, a better servant."

THE CIRCUMCISION AND THE NAME OF JESUS

January 1

This is a festival day, not only because the Nativity was observed a short week ago, nor because a new civil year begins, but because the holy Child was circumcised on the eighth day and given the name of names. In earlier centuries this whole period of the church year fell in the midst of one of the greatest heathen festival seasons. We can readily imagine how difficult it was to make headway in the observance of Christian holy days with the pagan world staging a riot of worldly pleasure and relaxation. This was true particularly of this feast, for it coincided with the calends, or first of January, when the heathen Roman world broke loose in the riotous orgies of the Saturnalia. The church has only reluctantly recognized the first of January as the beginning of a new year; her New Year's Day is the first Sunday in Advent. The Lutheran Reformers deplored deeply that the idea of the civil New Year's Day had made the circumcision decidedly secondary. Their sentiment was: "This day is called the New Year's Day after the custom of Rome. This and other things which we have received from Rome, we now let pass away. Since, however, the Feast of the Circumcision of Christ has been appointed to this day, it is proper that we preach about this today."

The Introit. — "O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is Thy name in all the earth! Who hast set Thy glory above the heavens. What is man that Thou art mindful of him and the son of man that Thou visitest him? Thou, O Lord, art our Father, our Redeemer, Thy name is from everlasting."

The Lutheran Hymnal offers an additional Introit, which in medieval Missals was appointed for the Feast of the Holy Name

of Jesus. "At the name of Jesus every knee should bow of things in heaven and things in earth and things under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is Thy name in all the earth."

It appears that the event emphasized is the naming. Our Lord's name is excellent, all-revealing. It is the promised name, which is above every name. But the first Introit speaks of God being mindful of man and visiting him. The Lord has come, come to stay with us. He is our Lord, we are His, as the Epistle states: "In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith."

The Collect. — "O Lord God, who for our sakes hast made Thy blessed Son our Savior subject to the Law and caused Him to endure the circumcision of the flesh, grant us the true circumcision of the Spirit, that our hearts may be pure from all sinful desires and lusts; through the same," etc.

The Lutheran Hymnal adds another Collect referring to the circumcision. "Almighty God, whose only-begotten Son, lest He break the Law, which He had come to fulfill, was this day circumcised, grant that He may ever defend our minds against all allurements of the flesh by the power of His grace."

A third Collect speaks of the naming. "God, who hast made Thine only-begotten Son the Savior of mankind and didst give Him the name of Jesus, mercifully grant that we who worship His name on earth may joyfully behold Him in heaven; through the same," etc.

A fourth Collect contemplates the year past and the year to come. "Almighty and Everlasting God, from whom cometh down every good and perfect gift, we give Thee thanks for all Thy benefits, temporal and spiritual, bestowed upon us in the year past, and we beseech Thee of Thy goodness grant us a favorable and joyful year, defend us from all dangers and adversities, and send upon us the fullness of Thy blessing."

The Epistle (Gal. 3:23-29). — This passage was probably appointed because it refers to Holy Baptism, of which circumcision is the old-covenant type and to the state under the Law before faith had come. Through the rite of circumcision the recipient

entered into the covenantal relation. Abraham's seed became the heir of the promise, "In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. . . . And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise." The Epistle establishes a connection of the name with the circumcision. When Abraham was 99 years old, God appeared to him and announced that He would seal a covenant with him and his offspring. "I will make My covenant between Me and you." An outward sign of the covenant and the mark of being included in it would be the ceremony of circumcision. "This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised; every male throughout your generations. . . . So shall My covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant." Circumcision was a symbol of the covenant with God. Through it man became the property and kinsman of God and was brought under the Law, in this way giving testimony of his fidelity to the covenant.

We may compare circumcision with Christian Baptism. By means of the latter a man enters the new covenant and becomes a Christian. Our Lord submitted to circumcision because He wanted to be subject to the ordinances of the Law. This was part of His abasement and obedience to the will of His Father and the price of the Redemption. Last Sunday we heard in the Epistle: "When the time had fully come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, to redeem those who were under the Law, so that we might receive the adoption as sons." Therefore the circumcision is one phase and step in Christ's great work of redeeming mankind, which began with the incarnation and birth, and ended with the death on the cross and the resurrection. Moreover, the circumcision has a still greater significance, since in this act the first blood of the Redeemer was shed, the first token of our redemption through the death on the cross. It was prolog to all the bitter suffering and sorrow He would have to endure in the future course of His life.

The Gradual. — "All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth. The Lord hath made known His salvation, His righteousness hath He openly showed in the sight of the heathen. Alleluia! Alleluia! God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son. Alleluia!"

The Proper Sentence. — "Alleluia! Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad before the Lord, for He hath made known His salvation. Alleluia!"

The Gospel (St. Luke 2:21). — With the performance of the ancient rite of circumcision came the custom of name giving, not merely as a means of identity but also as marking a distinct personality and as individualizing the life named. When the name was given, a person entered on his own peculiar development. The Feast of Circumcision cannot be disassociated from the birth of our Lord and must always be regarded as part of the cycle's great center, contributing its unique part to the record of the divine Son's redemptive work. Not the least phase of its value in the church year and to the worshiper is that it is also His Holy Name Day.

The Proper Preface. — "For in the mystery of the Word made flesh Thou hast given us a new revelation of Thy glory, that seeing Thee in the person of Thy Son, we may be drawn to the love of those things which are not seen."

THE EPIPHANY SEASON

The Feast of our Lord's Epiphany originated in the Eastern Church at least one hundred years before the Western Church began to observe it at the end of the fourth century. The Eastern Feast commemorated two manifestations, our Lord's Baptism and His birth. God the Father's acknowledgment of the human Christ as His only-begotten son and the anointing with the power from on high was the chief thought of the Feast. The birth seems to have been given consideration mainly because it was assumed that our Lord was baptized and anointed as the Christ on His thirtieth birthday. When the Baptism was commemorated, the term *theophany*, manifestation of God, was used. Soon other epiphanies

were added, as, for example, the first miracle. The inclusion of the Feast of our Lord's Epiphany in the calendar of the West in no way affected the observance of the Nativity. For although the Epiphany must be associated with Christmas, it initiates a distinct advance in the church year's teaching.

At Christmas we commemorate a historical event, the birth. True, behind this event lies a great idea of salvation, yet this idea is reserved for those who search beneath the surface. The majority rejoices over the fact that the Savior was born and in spirit stands happily at the manger. The Epiphany season, however, centers our attention not on a single event but presents an idea that assumes concrete form only through facts in our Lord's life. The idea of the Epiphany is that the Christ who was born in Bethlehem is recognized by the world. He was manifested as God, and the world recognizes Him as God. The relation of the Nativity and the Epiphany is that at Christmas God appears as man and at Epiphany this man appears before the world as God. Christmas is the feast of Christ's appearance as man, Epiphany is the feast of Christ's appearance as God. This represents an important stage in the church's teaching. That Christ is man is proved by the fact that he was really born and lived among us as man. That is why at Christmas we celebrate only the historical fact of the birth. But that this man, this helpless child, is God, needed proof. His birth would be of no benefit to us if we were not convinced that this man is God. To the Feast of the Nativity had to be added the Feast of God's Appearance. In the prolog to his Gospel, St. John links the two feasts admirably: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth (Christmas); we have beheld His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father (Epiphany)."

The Epiphany brings the proof that the man Jesus is God in the flesh. How could the man born in Bethlehem establish that He is God? Only by signs and wonders. All His miracles have the purpose of proving to men that He is God. To the miracles chosen by the church to show in this season that God had appeared among men any number could be added.

These proofs, of course, do not compel men to believe. Added must be grace from God's side. A star appeared to the Magi.

Divine grace worked in them and led them to faith and the conviction of Christ's deity. Perhaps this gives us a hint why the history of the Magi was appointed by the Western Church as the holy Gospel for the Feast of the Epiphany. The Magi were brought to faith in the Son of God. As the first Gentile believers they represent us who are of the Gentile world. Epiphany is the Gentile Feast of Faith. We celebrate our call to faith.

The Feast celebrates a central idea which is based on, or associated with, a group of events. He who has come, born a babe in Bethlehem, conformed to the Law, given a human name, He it is who was promised of old, the Christ of God, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, and He is now to be manifested in all the divine glory. The season steadily develops this idea. The Christ Child is manifested to the Gentiles and received and acclaimed by them. As a youth of twelve years He dedicates His life to His Father's things. He manifests forth His glory by the first of His signs, and His disciples believe in Him. He cleanses the leper because He wills, and He cures the palsied servant at a distance. He rebukes the storm, and the winds and the sea obey Him. The glory of heaven streams forth from His human form at the Transfiguration, and the Father declares, "This is My beloved Son." Perhaps the original Gospel for the Feast, the account of our Lord's Baptism, should have been retained. If it had been retained as the holy Gospel for the Feast, the season would begin and end with the Father's declaration, at the Baptism and at the Transfiguration: "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

The number of Sundays after the Epiphany varies and is determined by the later or earlier date of Easter. Most frequently there are only three. A complete set of Propers is provided for four, if the Transfiguration is included. The rubric of our present *Liturgy* directs: "The Introit, Collect, Epistle, Gradual, and Gospel for the Transfiguration of our Lord shall be used on the last Sunday after the Epiphany in each year, except when there is only one Sunday after the Epiphany." The Feast of Our Lord's Transfiguration was observed in the East as early as the sixth century. In the Roman and Anglican Communion and in the new Service Book prepared by the Joint Lutheran Commission on the Liturgy

it is observed on August 6, the date on which Pope Calixtus III announced the victory of Hunyady's army over the forces of Islam at Belgrade in 1456. In *The Lutheran Liturgy*, Luther D. Reed observes: "Since this feast received only limited observance on August 6, usually a weekday; and since it seemed appropriate as a climax to the Epiphany season, the Reformers Bugenhagen and Veit Dietrich chose it as the theme for sermons on the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany."

Thus the last Sunday after the Epiphany is observed each year as the Feast of the Transfiguration, except when there is only one Sunday after the Epiphany. Keeping in mind the one rare exception, which will not occur during the remainder of this century, it may be said that the Transfiguration is observed every year. The heading in *The Lutheran Hymnal*, "Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany (Transfiguration)," could mislead, as it might create the impression in the minds of those who do not read the rubric under it that the Transfiguration is commemorated only when there are six Sundays after the Epiphany.* On the Fourth and Fifth Sundays, if they are not the last, the rubric applies: "The Introit and the Gradual are the same as for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany." The lessons for these Sundays are more general. In ancient times the Propers not used at this time were used at the end of the Trinity season, as needed. This was true, before the Reformation, also of the lessons for the sixth Sunday after the Epiphany.

A closer examination of the Propers appointed for the Sundays of this season will reveal that it is difficult to establish a relationship between the various parts without becoming artificial. The Introits seem to be less expressive than in other seasons. Their immediate connection with a specific teaching of the day is less apparent and at best confined to a mere phrase. They exhibit the broadest function of the Introit in that they give a general festival tone to the church's worship, inspired not by a single event but by the great all-revealing glory of the Epiphany. They are calls to worship, the worshipping church joining her praises with a rejoicing creation and an adoring heavenly host.

* In the 1955 and subsequent printings the Transfiguration rubric has been placed under the "Second Sunday after Epiphany."

The holy Gospels exhibit some new manifestation of Christ's character Sunday by Sunday. The Epistles enforce the special feature of the Gospels and show how it is to be reproduced in the Christian life and character. On the first three Sundays the twelfth chapter of Romans offers no unusual difficulties. But on the fourth Sunday more ingenuity, or imagination, is required. Some have wished that the opening verses of the thirteenth chapter would be included. Instead, the Epistle for the fourth Sunday begins with the eighth verse.

Proceeding from the supposition that the holy Gospels present the leading thought of the day, that the Epistles teach how we are to manifest in our lives the epiphany recorded in the holy Gospel, and that the Collects turn the lesson of the day into a prayer for this manifestation of Christ's character in our lives, the following scheme suggests itself:

The First Sunday.—The holy Gospel: Duty. The Epistle: Precepts of Duty in Christ's Kingdom. The Collect: ". . . what things we ought to do . . . faithfully fulfill the same."

The Second Sunday.—The holy Gospel: Sympathy. The Epistle: Christian Sympathy. The Collect: ". . . mercifully hear the supplications of Thy people, and grant us Thy peace all the days of our life," the assurance of the divine mercy and sympathy, trust in the infinite power united with infinite sympathy.

The Third Sunday.—The holy Gospel: Mercy. The Epistle: Christian Mercy. The Collect: ". . . mercifully look upon our infirmities and in all our dangers and necessities . . . help and defend us."

The Fourth Sunday.—The holy Gospel: Power. The Epistle: Power to Overcome When Tempted to Be Loveless. The Collect: ". . . we cannot always stand upright . . . grant us such strength and protection as may support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptations."

The Fifth Sunday.—The holy Gospel: Patience. The Epistle: The Patience of the Saints. The Collect: ". . . Keep us . . . continually in Thy true religion . . . who lean upon the hope of Thy heavenly grace . . . defended by Thy mighty power."

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