*Come, thou long expected Jesus*

*born to set Thy people free;*

*from our fears and sins release us,*

*let us find our rest in Thee.*

*Israel's strength and consolation,*

*hope of all the earth thou art;*

*dear desire of every nation,*

*joy of every longing heart.*

*In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Good morning!

Wow. I absolutely cannot believe it's the last Sunday of Advent, the last Sunday before Christmas. There's just a little bit more time to get your presents together and maybe a little late to order from Amazon, there's a little more time to send out your cards so they don't show up awkwardly past the 25th, just enough time to get your Christmas dinner plans ready. There's an imminence to the week before Christmas, especially for procrastinators like me. But in that last scurry to get things ready, for Church, for life, I think there's a real excitement as well. I think imminence and excitement are two feelings that can help us not only reflect more fully on how Luke would have his readers enter into his account of the heady days before the Messiah's birth, but also help us prepare our hearts that Jesus would truly be among us coming Christmastide.

As I mentioned to you a few weeks ago, Luke was an artful storyteller and part of what makes him such a great evangelist is how he helped his audience to see that the story of the People of God, the story of the Bible, was continuing to unfold right in front of them, of us. Luke's first three chapters are incredibly rich with divine drama, and I think today's Gospel lesson is a great expression of how we are meant to experience that drama in the writing, meant to experience some of the most ancient traditions of the Church.

Luke's account of the Gospel is interestingly front loaded with amazing details of Jesus' family life, especially with details about Mary. Many scholars throughout the ages have thought that Luke was privy to Mary's own teaching about the story of her son, a tradition that would certainly help to fill in any gaps of Jesus' family origins. By the time we get to our Gospel reading from today, we have already seen or heard that God was moving mightily through his people, especially through Jesus' family. We read about Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, who was struck mute because he disbelieved the report that Gabriel the herald angel made about how his wife Elizabeth would bear a child despite having been barren. We've also read about the Annunciation to Mary, with the Angelic Salutation, "Hail Mary, full of grace," the promise that she would conceive of the Holy Ghost and bare a son named Jesus who would be the Son of God. The lowly virgin's obedience to Gabriel's call runs a contrast to her cousin's husband, the priest. Mary would say, "be it unto me according to thy word," and instead of being struck mute, she is able to sing her song, the *Magnificat*, to Elizabeth and all Christian hearts hence to tell what sort of God it is that would come to redeem the world, what kind of Messiah would be sent to the world to save it.

When Elizabeth's child of promise jumped in response to his cousin in Mary's womb, Elizabeth began to realize what grace was working among them. Mary responded to Elizabeth with her song, and in a lyrical tradition that actually stretches all the way back to the song of Hannah, Samuel's Mother back in 1 Samuel and connects deeply with the Psalter (especially praise psalms like 110 and others), Mary beautifully hymned to God the hope of His faithful people. She sang of the hope of her Savior God who would not be aloof to the call and cry of the humble maiden. She sang of a God who is truly mighty, truly pure in His holiness. She sang of a God who even in His awesome might and power, is known for His mercy and kindness across the ages. She sang of a God who upends the unjust powers of the world, and uplifts those of humble estate. She sang of a God who desires to feed the hungry but leaves the faithless rich to their own spoils. She sang of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; of Moses and David, who despite the many breaches of Covenant committed by Israel, remained merciful and just according to the ancient promises He made. This God was coming to us through the work of the Holy Spirit and because of her obedience. Dear Mary held our Lord in her belly, the very Word of God, through which all things were created, grew in the tabernacle of her body so that he could dwell with us, so that we ourselves could hold his presence in our own hearts.

Soon after Magnificat was sung for the first time, Jesus our Messiah, the Christ, was born: who law is love and Gospel is peace. As a preacher it is my honor to proclaim this to you, but as a Christian brother, sometimes I get to see this sort of thing work out firsthand in remarkable ways. Many of you know that this past week, someone committed burglary here at the parish and made off with last week's Sunday offering. It's certainly not a catastrophic crisis, but it is unexpected, unwelcome, and uncomfortable. And even as I was trying to confirm which circle of the inferno such a thief would find himself; I received a note that just about bowled me over. One of our number was not moved to wrath, not as concerned with the arrogance of our earthly sense of justice. But rather, sent me a note of rather tender concern for the wellbeing of the Church, and the wellbeing of the thief's spiritual estate. How desperate must a person be, the writer's logic concluded, for a man to steal from a place that would just as likely try to meet his needs both in body and spirit. As a pastor, a trained moral theologian, as a brother... I was overwhelmed that the ministry of the Word made Flesh had taken such root in someone's heart. In reading that note, and in recounting it to you now, my own soul doth magnify the Lord, and my Spirit rejoices in God our Savior. It is a wonderful thing to enjoy even the smallest fruit of the true King's Kingdom, especially in the face of great brokenness.

And so, this coming week, as Christmas, its Eve, its most wonderful moments, and its beautiful worship approach, I pray that each of you would know the love of God so present to Mary, and therefore know the presence of Christ in and among you. Have patience at the shop, and with your delivery drivers, spread the cheer of the Messiah wherever you go, and keep in your mouths the praises of our God and King.

O Christ,

By thine own eternal Spirit

rule in all our hearts alone.

by thine all sufficient merit,

raise us to thy glorious throne.

To God be all Glory from age to age. Amen.