

December 29, 2024 – Colossians 3:12-17

“O holy child of Bethlehem, Descend to us we pray; Cast out our sin and enter in, Be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels The great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Immanuel!”

We sang those words a few days ago on Christmas Eve in the words of the beloved Christmas carol O Little Town of Bethlehem. It's one of my favorite Christmas carols. I have some very good memories associated with it.

But as I was singing it on Tuesday night, I started thinking about a phrase that's used in the final verse, that I just read: Be born in us today. While the phrase may sound like it's quoting scripture, it's not actually. The author, Philip Brooks, is taking some poetic license here. But it's not a bad concept.

Scripture certainly talks about Christ dwelling in us, for example. And, indeed, Christ does so by the work of the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit by whom Jesus was conceived in the virgin Mary. So to say that Christ is conceived and born in us by the Holy Spirit in a similar way that he was conceived in Mary and born in Bethlehem is actually a rather useful image.

And yet, we still need to define this phrase. What does it mean for Jesus to be born in us today? Because usually we talk about us being born – or reborn – in Jesus. Well, I think when Brooks wrote this, he was aiming to describe the effect that having faith in Christ has on us. He says that when Christ is born in us, he casts out our sin. There's no room for Christ and sin to coexist in the life of a believer. Christ forgives us, he washes us clean, he gives us that rebirth, and then he tosses that sin out the window. As far as the east is from the west.

And then he stays there, within us. Abiding with us. He is our Lord Immanuel. God with us. Ever present. Ever guiding us into His Word and His righteousness. When Christ is born in you, there's a change. That doesn't mean you stop sinning entirely. But it does mean that you recognize the conflict that sin is in your life. If Christ is going to abide in you, then sin can't.

And you repent. You turn from the sin and say, “No, if Christ is going to stay, then this sin can't. It needs to go.” And what goes in its place?

Well, that's what St Paul is discussing in our Epistle lesson today. Christ is born in us. Sin is cast out. And now, we are left with the question: What do we put in its place? What do we put on to replace the sin that has been cast out? How do we clothe ourselves after the filthy rags of unrighteousness are purged by Christ?

I think that's a good question to ask ourselves right now. After all, in a few days, we'll be at the start of a new year. The new year has always been a time for reevaluating the past and planning for the future. Looking at who we were in 2024 and who we want to be in 2025.

For the world, that involves deciding how to eat better. How to exercise more. How to be more financially responsible. How to use our time more wisely. And I suppose, in a First Article sense, there's value in those sorts of resolutions. Because sometimes we do need to be better stewards of our physical bodies and possessions.

Yet, we are not just a body, nor are we just possessions. Our bodies will grow old and die. Our possessions will rust and decay. These are temporary things. Mortal things. Things that are passing away. And our hope in Christ's resurrection is not that God will preserve this mortal body or this sinful earth, but that he will give us immortal bodies and a sinless earth. Our hope is that God will make all physical things new. Just as he has already made us spiritually new.

He has made us spiritually new by giving us rebirth and by being born in us today. By dwelling within us through the power of the Holy Spirit. By casting out our sin and entering in.

No, if New Years is a time for reevaluating the past and planning for the future, then for us as Christians our primary responsibility is to reevaluate how we have loved God and loved our neighbor in 2024 and plan for how we can love God and love our neighbor better in 2025. And the somewhat archaic, but precise term for these kinds of activities is virtues. What virtues were we lacking in 2024? What virtues can we pursue in 2025? How can we be more virtuous people?

That's Paul's entire message to the Colossians in our reading today. This is one long list of virtues. This is Paul telling the Colossians, "When Christ has cast out your sin and entered in, this is what you put on to replace the sin that no longer fits in your life. You are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved. He has chosen to be born in you today. And as his chosen ones, as those who have Christ dwelling within them by the power of the Holy Spirit, these are the virtues that you can and should pursue."

And so we start off with a very simple, direct list: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience. If you didn't notice, these are all selfless qualities. These are sacrificial virtues:

- A person who is compassionate thinks about another person's suffering before their own suffering.
- A person who is kind thinks about another person's feelings before their own feelings.
- A person who is humble thinks about another person's accomplishments before their own accomplishments.
- A person who is meek thinks about another person's glory before their own glory.
- A person who is patient thinks about another person's time before their own time.

Sacrificing for another person is a virtue. And it leads to all sorts of other virtues. We are called to be sacrificial as Christ himself was sacrificial. And that is demonstrated most evidently when we forgive. For just as we sacrifice as Christ sacrifices for us, so also do we forgive as Christ has forgiven us.

This is the core of Christian love. The world looks at love as mere emotion. Something that makes us feel good. Worldly love is selfish. It takes what it wants from a friendship or relationship and then vanishes as soon as it's no longer useful.

Christ's love is sacrifice. As St John tells us, *"By this we know love, that [Christ] laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers."* And again a chapter later, *"In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."*

Divine love is sacrificial. Always. Full stop. There is no such thing as selfish love in God's eyes. And so if we live with this sacrificial love of Christ in our lives, then all sorts of other selfless, sacrificial virtues come naturally to us. They are bound to our lives in perfect harmony.

And we are then bound to each other in one body. For we're no longer individuals seeking our own gain, but parts of a whole, sacrificing for the good of the body. To seek the peace of Christ in the church is to seek those sacrificial virtues which bind us together into an interconnected whole.

Which then leads us to more virtues that cannot be accomplished by ourselves, but only when we work together as one body. Virtues like thankfulness for the gifts God gives us in this church. Thankfulness for Holy Baptism. Thankfulness for the Lord's Supper. Thankfulness for the forgiveness of sins. Thankfulness for generous hearts.

Virtues like gathering together, as we are this very day, to hear God's Word, so that it dwells in us richly. So that it is born in us not just on Christmas Eve, but every day of the year. Virtues like hearing the teaching and admonishment of a sermon or a Bible study. Virtues like singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs together with thankful hearts.

Virtues like setting aside our own pride and doing everything here in the name of the Lord Jesus. Taking no credit for ourselves, but giving him all the credit for his wonderful work in us. And giving him thanks every day for that work of salvation.

*"O holy child of Bethlehem, Descend to us we pray; Cast out our sin and enter in, Be born in us today."* Be born in us and clothe us with your righteousness. That we may put on the virtues of your grace. And, in 2025, be the virtuous people you have called us to be. That all may see us and know by our love that we are disciples of Jesus Christ. We are born in him and he has been born in us. Amen.