

December 17, 2025 – 1 John 1:1-4 & Matthew 1:18-25

My wife and I love Christmas nativities. And we have a lot of them. I'm not sure how the collection started exactly. It just... happened. One minute, we were newlyweds scrounging to decorate our home for our first Christmas together. The next, we had boxes and boxes of nativities. 41 of them, by my wife's last count.

Not that I'm complaining. Yeah, they're kind of a pain to take out and put back into storage every year. They take up a fair amount of space. But we enjoy them greatly. They're all so very different. Different styles. Different sizes. Some are plain statues, while other are ornaments or snow-globes or wall hangings. But they all have the same three people in the center: Mary, Joseph, and Jesus lying in a manger.

The nativity – or crèche, as it was once more commonly called – is one of the most common decorations of the Christmas season. Sometimes they're large and outdoors, like Immanuel's is, set up in front of the church for the whole community to see. Sometimes they're like what we have in our home: small and indoors. Placed on a table or shelf or mantle or wherever else we can find a place for them.

We know, of course, that these are decorations. Wood, resin, porcelain. They don't breathe. They don't speak. And yet we keep using them. Generation after generation. Church after church. Home after home. Why?

Well, because we are people who need to see and touch. God made us that way. We're not disembodied minds or floating spirits. We live in bodies. We learn through our senses. We remember through sight and sound and touch.

And when it comes to the things of God – things that are, by nature, unseen – we instinctively reach for something tangible. Something concrete. Something we can point to and say, “This is what it was like. This is what happened. This is where God became man.”

That instinct isn't accidental. It's not merely nostalgic. It's a doctrine that is at the very heart of the Christian faith. Listen again to the opening words of 1 John: *“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.”*

John is almost piling up verbs. Heard. Seen. Looked upon. Touched. He is deliberately emphasizing the physicality of what he's talking about. Christianity, John insists, is not a set of abstract ideas. It's not a philosophy. It's not a spiritual feeling detached from history. It's something that happened in the real world, in time and space, in flesh and blood.

The Word of life came to us. And that Word of life could be heard and seen and touched. God became man and stepping into our world. And John heard him. And saw him. And touched him. That is a shocking claim. And it was meant to be.

From the very beginning, the Church had to confess this against two equal and opposite errors. On the one hand, there were those who wanted to turn Jesus into a mere symbol. An inspiring teacher. A moral example. A mere man and nothing more. On the other hand, there were those who wanted a god who stayed safely distant. Untouched by human weakness, suffering, and death. A god who might have looked like a man, but it was all an illusion.

John will have none of it. What we proclaim to you, he says, is the eternal Son of God who became so real, so tangible, that human hands could rest upon Him. Anything less than that is contrary to the apostles' testimony.

That confession brings us directly to the nativity. When we set up a crèche, whether large or small, we are not merely decorating. We are confessing. We are saying that God did not save the world from a distance. He did not shout forgiveness from heaven. He came down. He took on flesh. He entered our world the same way we enter it: by being born.

When Matthew tells the story of Jesus' birth, he approaches it from an interesting angle. There are no shepherds in his account, no angels singing in the fields. Instead, Matthew focuses on Joseph. On confusion. On fear. On the quiet, ordinary drama of a man who discovers that the woman he is pledged to marry is pregnant.

Joseph plans to do the decent thing. To divorce her quietly. To avoid scandal. But then the angel speaks: *"That which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."* And then the angel speaks his name. *"You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."*

And how will He do that? Not symbolically. Not metaphorically. But by taking those sins into His own flesh. The child we place in the manger isn't a prop. He is Emmanuel: God with us. God not merely alongside humanity, but joined to it. Bone of our bone. Flesh of our flesh. Subject to hunger. Subject to fatigue. Subject, ultimately, to death.

The Church has always insisted on the full humanity of Christ, because, as one of the early Church Fathers put it so plainly, "that which He has not assumed He has not healed." Gregory of Nazianzus wrote those words all the way back in the fourth century A.D. to defend the truth that the Son of God truly took on our human nature.

If Christ did not assume our flesh, our weakness, our suffering, even our death, then none of it could be redeemed. But because He did assume it, because He was truly conceived, truly born, truly human, our humanity is not left outside God's saving work. It is taken up, healed, and redeemed in Him.

Which means that the nativity already points forward to the cross. The hands that John says he touched would one day be pierced. The body born of Mary would be laid in a tomb. The salvation Jesus brings is not an idea you contemplate. It is an event He accomplishes. In His body. With His blood.

And then, on the third day, that same body rose from the dead. Not as a ghost. Not as a vision. But as a living, tangible Lord who could be seen and heard and touched again. *"See my hands and my feet,"* He tells Thomas. *"Touch me, and see."*

This is why the Christian faith has always been so stubbornly physical. Water poured over heads. Bread broken. Wine poured out. A spoken word that does what it says. God gives His grace in ways you can hear, see, taste, and touch.

So when our children put on their nativity play this Sunday, when they dress as Mary and Joseph and shepherds, when they stumble over lines and sing familiar songs, they are doing more than reenacting a story. They are participating in the Church's ancient confession: this really happened. God really came. He entered our history, our sinful mess, our weakness.

And He will come again. Advent never lets us stop at the manger. The same Jesus who came once in humility will come again in glory. And His second coming will be no less tangible than the first.

The angels tell the disciples in at the Ascension, *"This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go."* Bodily. Visibly. Publicly. The Christian hope is not escape from the physical world, but its renewal. The resurrection of the body. The life of the world to come.

That's why we wait. That is why Advent trains us in patience and expectation. The nativity scenes we set out now are reminders that God keeps His promises. He has come. He is present. And He will come again.

So set up the nativity. Tell the story. Let the children act it out. And above all, hear the proclamation again: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And because He did, we aren't left grasping at shadows. We are given Christ Himself.

Christ in the manger. Christ on the cross. Christ risen from the tomb. Christ in, with, and under bread and wine. And soon, Christ coming in glory. Amen.