

## THE FESTIVAL OF THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD

Isaiah 52:7-10

*“The voice of your watchmen.”*

Last season, I was in the Palace with our youth and some other members for what will probably be the most exciting sports moment of my entire life. Notice I say that I was in the Palace, and not that I saw it. I saw the rest of the game. I watched rather carefully. Things were back and forth until the Nuggets grabbed a nice lead at the end. I was sure the game was over. I was trying to make sure everyone had a ride home. Then everything went nuts—pandemonium. When I turned around, people were running back up the aisles to their seats. Rasheed Wallace was smiling from ear to ear on the far side of the court. Chauncey Billups was shaking his head in disbelief. Somehow, the score was tied.

“What happened?” I asked someone. She said, “You had to see it.” I hadn’t seen it. When I saw it later on the big screen and that night on ESPN, I kicked myself. I had only turned away for a moment, a brief moment, and I missed it. Rasheed Wallace stole the inbounds pass and hit what was almost a full court shot. I was at the game. I can forever tell people that. But when they ask, “Well, did you see it?” I’ll have to answer, “No.”

Imagine being a watchman, a sentry on a tower. Could there be a more boring job? Coffee must have been invented for watchmen. Day after day, you climb the steps to your tower, sit in a chair or pace back and forth, and watch. And what do you watch? Nothing, at least 99% of the time.

You’ve all had those mornings when keeping your eyes open feels like lifting a hundred pound weight with your eyelids, when your whole body feels like play dough—let’s just be thankful no one ever feels like that in church. Imagine watching, watching, watching, seeing nothing but the grass grow.

Yet Isaiah rejoices, prophesies as if living through Christmas himself, the cadence of the verse betraying his unbridled excitement, *“The voice of your watchmen—they lift up their voice; together they sing for joy; for eye to eye they see the return of the LORD to Zion.”* It was that once-in-a-lifetime moment, the longshot, and the watchmen cry out with all they’ve got.

What’s the big deal? Isaiah tells us: *“Break forth together into singing, you waste places of Jerusalem, for the LORD has comforted his people; he has redeemed Jerusalem. The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.”*

And all God’s people said, “What! He can’t say that. He called us waste places. That’s not nice. That hurts my feelings. Who does he think he is?” And there you have Christmas in the twenty-first century, don’t you?

In a German newspaper online they were recently debating whether coveting your neighbor’s spouse is really a sin. There were actually some theologians calling themselves Christians that claimed we’ve outgrown at least some of the Ten

Commandments. I'll have to remind my kids of that when they get older and it becomes okay for them to touch a hot iron, hit people who make them mad, or throw baseballs at the window.

Reading the comments on the article quickly led me to the conclusion that Germany isn't that different than our own society, because the argument of those opposing God's will and Word remains the same: It's not nice to tell people not to do things they want to do, to call them sinners if they do. You could hurt someone's feelings that way, after all.

*"Break forth together into singing, you waste places..."* And that is what we are: waste places. We do not grow out of God's commandments, we grow up and break them more efficiently than we did as children, at least when we let our feelings, our impulses, our thoughts be our guide. All our best works, all those works originating from within us and not in Christ, leave an unfortunate trail of garbage marking our wayward paths. And I hope that hurts your feelings, because it's supposed to, because that's the first part of repentance, and sorrowing over our sin is what makes the second part of repentance so joyful: faith in Christ.

Last Wednesday, just before Vespers and Nicholas' Christmas concert at St. John's, the Christmas tree fell down. We lifted it up again and again, trying to get it to stay. Later, in retrospect, I thought of them lifting of the tree of the cross of Christ, it rocking back and forth as they put it into place. The Christmas tree should remind us of Christ's cross, the tree of our salvation, green with the life that flows from Jesus' sacrifice. In fact, this year I plan to cut the branches off the tree and make a cross out of the trunk. May the fragrance of that tree fill our hearts the next few days as the scent of pine fills our houses, reminding us of the reason this Child was born, reminding us of the love that made Christ man.

There was an interview in a British newspaper last week where the Archbishop of Canterbury called the nativity story legend. He made some valid points—there's no way of knowing if it snowed, or how many wise men there were, and whatnot—but this has been part of a larger and very disturbing trend of the Archbishop calling biblical events, even the most important, legend. I don't know who the Archbishop is catering too, but if you don't want a God capable of the miraculous, you don't want God, you want you. At one point, he speculated that there probably weren't oxen or asses at the nativity. I have to confess some guilty laughter when one snarky British commenter, perhaps a disenchanting Anglican fed up with their apostate bishops, wryly quipped, "In fact, there is an ass involved in this story: Archbishop Williams." Gotta love those Brits.

The nativity is no legend. The nativity is salvation. And any man of the cloth worth his alb and stoles ought to spend his time focusing on what we do know for sure, because the Gospels make it certain. God is in the manger. God's holy arm, wrapped in swaddling clothes, totally dependent on His virgin mother, wiggles with the same innocence with which it will flex upon the cross, strong to save, having taken flesh to offer it for you in death and to you in life in the Sacrament, to redeem you as His people.

The word for salvation in our text is the same as our Lord's name. To proclaim salvation is to proclaim Jesus. Feelings change, but Jesus doesn't. You're at the game; don't miss it. You'll kick yourself for the rest of time. No, take a good look and "*break forth together into singing.*" And if you want to feel something special today, feel His Body and Blood in your mouth, feel His Word in your ears, because He is as He comes to you today what He was when He came for you on that first Christmas: He is good news, He is salvation, He is that moment. Amen.