

## Pastoral Message from Fr. George for 12.22.23



Year after year, we are drawn to Christmas – the Nativity of our Lord. On Christmas Eve, we look forward to singing carols, lighting our windows with candlelight, and smelling the fragrance of pine or poinsettias. On Christmas Eve, Orthodox Christians read the Evangelist Luke’s account of the Nativity of our Lord, and it draws Him ever so close to our hearts:

***2: In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup>This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup>All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup>Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup>He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup>And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped Him in bands of cloth, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:1-7)***

Why is it that we are so drawn to this special commemoration? What attracts us to come to church and associate ourselves with this Great Feast, which this year, we will prepare for on Christmas Eve morning, and celebrate joyously on Christmas morning? There are, I suppose, as many answers to these questions as there are people who celebrate Christmas itself.

As your Pastor, I would like to offer some reasons for our unique interest. Perhaps you will agree with some of them, and then again, perhaps I have failed to remember others dear to you. My purpose is to call our attention to this special annual remembrance, and in the days leading up to it, perhaps we in turn will respond by preparing through prayer, fasting, service, and charity to receive the King of Kings and the Prince of Peace in our hearts, our homes, and our souls!

I believe many will come join us on Christmas because they are believers, faithful followers of Christ Jesus. They will join us in church to celebrate the Nativity of our Lord. *In the Name of the Incarnate Christ, I welcome them to*

*come, worship, and adore our Savior! For those traveling or sick, we will pray for your welfare.*

Some will come to church this Christmas because they once believed and would like to believe again. They come with the remembrance of love and peace and shared hopes over many years now gathered into one great longing – a longing to be with God, to become whole; a longing that the emptiness they now know too well might at last be filled. *In the name of the Incarnate Christ that they long for, I welcome them to come, worship, and adore our Savior!*

Perhaps some will come to church or try to do so, because, although they neither believe nor hope to believe, they still respect the tradition or desire to honor the wishes of family members and friends. They come because they would not, by their absence, spoil the Christmas of those they love. *In the name of the Incarnate Christ, the God of their fathers and mothers, I welcome them to come, worship, and adore our Savior!*

*<sup>8</sup>In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup>But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup>to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, Who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup>This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”*  
*(Luke 2:8-12)*



To all of us – believers, unbelievers, and those who cannot be sure from moment to moment whether or not they believe – to all of us was born in the city of David a Savior, Who is Christ, the Lord!

His birth is good news of a great joy for all the people precisely because it is God's gentle and loving way of overcoming the distinction between believers, doubters, and unbelievers.

The announcement of Jesus' birth was made not to Caesar Augustus nor Quirinius; nor was it made to Herod or Annas or Caiaphas. Quite simply, it was not made to the political or religious leaders. The heavenly heralds of the Christ Child's birth sought out instead mere shepherds – the equivalent of today's "blue-collar workers" – who labored throughout the late hours of the night into early morning, doing an unglamorous job in their world.

Notice there was no angelic debate over the shepherds' worthiness to be the recipients of so great an announcement. No shepherds were singled out for either believing, doubting, or even not believing. St. Luke in his Gospel provides us no indication that God selected these particular shepherds because of their superior moral or spiritual credentials. Nor did the angels segregate the pious shepherds from those who went to synagogue only on high holy days like Passover and Yom Kippur. No such distinctions were made. Instead, there was the announcement of good news of great joy for all the people.

*How the world needs to hear this unifying message this Christmas!* Yes, this Christmas when ethnic and religious differences account for the torture, rape, and murder of countless victims around the world. Yes, this Christmas when

**anarchy reigns throughout much of the undeveloped parts of our world, with its warring parties caring little about the resulting starvation of literally millions of human beings.**

**Yes, this Christmas when religious intolerance and racial bigotry make themselves felt and heard, and terrorists continue to plot to rid the world of Jews and Christians, and any others who do not follow their religious and fanatical views. Yes, this Christmas when families confront the continued and seemingly never-ending stresses from job loss and economic conditions, the destructive dynamics of anger and distancing, and the divisive potential of competing demands for limited time and resources within our world.**

**Yes, this Christmas when many in our midst know an echoing emptiness in their lives, an estrangement from friends, and a loneliness due to loss – loss of a relative or friend, or loss of a love – and wonder why God allows this to happen and ponder how they can possibly go on.**

**Yes, this Christmas when people are not of one mind, body, or spirit with themselves, their families, their neighbors, their employers, their church, or even their God, . . . *we need good news of a great joy for all the people.***

**More than that, we need the very One whose birth the angels announced. Precisely this One: for like all babies, He is the fruit of the union of His mother and His father. And unlike any other before or after Him, this One unifies in His own being both divinity and humanity. In Him, God and all of humanity are at last of one mind, body, and spirit. We embrace one another with joy. That is why**

**His birth is and can be good news of great joy for all the people. For He alone is God Incarnate among us, sharing our fate, our struggles, and our sense of alienation from self and others.**

**Truly human, our Incarnate Lord and Savior knows our frailties and failings, our sinful tendency to make and multiply distinctions between people and make them the basis for division.**

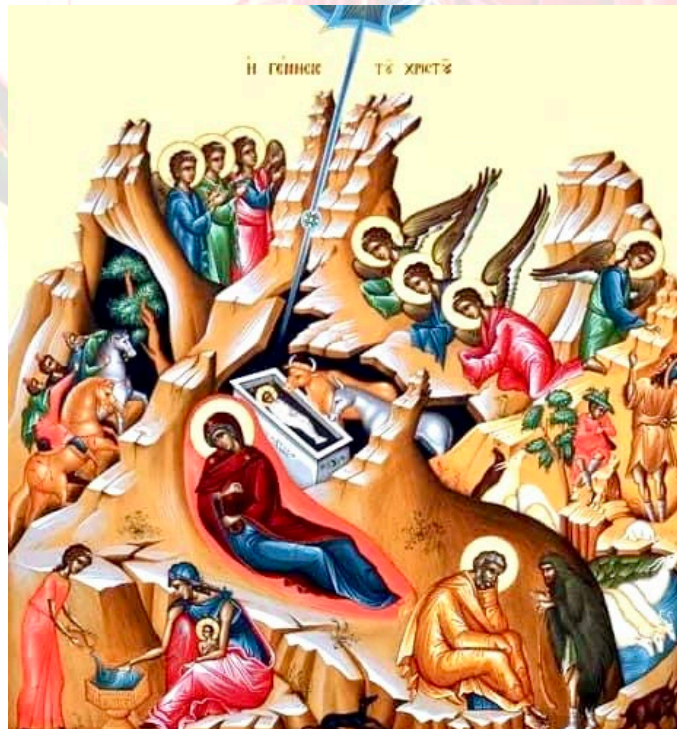
**Truly human, our Incarnate Lord and Savior takes these frailties and failings into His own divine being and essence and overcomes them. Not by overwhelming us with celestial power and might, but by joining us in those two universal human realities that unify all mortal beings, birth and death, whose eternal symbols in our faith are the manger and the cross.**

**All of us were born and all of us will die. The birth of this holy child transfers those universal realities from the chaotic and divisive realm of fear and terror to the unifying realm of hope and expectation. Jesus' birth and death make relative all other distinctions and pointless all divisions based on those distinctions. For if God and humanity are of one mind, body, and spirit in our Incarnate Lord, then what other distinction – racial, religious, or political – can divide us from God or from one another?**

**Our Savior was born for all of humanity. He was born not to demand our faith, but to bring about it and enable it. As the Incarnation of God's holy love for all people, Christ Jesus invites our faith and makes that faith possible.**



***Oh, come let us – let all the people – adore Him,  
the Savior, Who is Christ, the Lord. Amen!***



# Christ Is Born! Let Us Glorify Him!

**December 22, Preparation for the Nativity of Christ**

**8:00 Great Hours**

**December 24, Sunday Before the Nativity; Christmas Eve**

**7:45 Orthros**

**9:00 Divine Liturgy**

**December 25, Nativity of our Lord & Savior, Jesus Christ**

**7:45 Orthros**

**9:00 Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great**

**11:30 Christmas Lunch for the Homeless at St. John the Wonderworker Church in Atlanta**

**December 27, St. Stephen, Archdeacon & First Martyr**

**9:00 Divine Liturgy**

**December 27 - 30, Metropolis of Atlanta Winter Youth Rally  
December 31, Sunday After the Nativity**

**7:45 Orthros**

**9:00 Divine Liturgy**

**11:00 Let's EAT!**

**4:00pm Orthros on the Eve of Circumcision of our Lord & Savior, Jesus Christ, & Eve of Feast of St. Basil the Great (commemorated January 1)**

**5:00 Divine Liturgy & Blessing & Cutting of Vasilopita on the Eve of Circumcision of our Lord & Savior, Jesus Christ, & Eve of Feast of St. Basil the Great (commemorated January 1)**

