

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

We Christians are here to celebrate on this holy night, with stars so brightly shining. This is the night of our dear Savior's birth. This is our night!

But churches are no longer as full as they once were. Somehow, the luster has gone out of organized religion, polls show, including or maybe especially Christianity. A Gallup poll that came out in March of this year showed that for the first time since they've been measuring it, church membership fell to less than 50% of the population (see Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time," March 29, 2021, news.gallup.com). And it has been a precipitous decline since 2000.

Our modern culture with its technology has caused us to curve in on ourselves. We can't abide a pastor in church to preach for ten minutes on what the Bible says, but we will watch for hours some self-absorbed person on YouTube, Facebook, or TikTok talk about his own self-discovered spirituality. Yes, so many today find their shallow selves and their journey of self-discovery utterly fascinating, and the depths of Christian theological thought dull.

If they're posting on social media, that probably means they're 30 or under, thus with all of about 10 years or so of thinking about things spiritual. Surely, that is the person you want to turn to for spiritual guidance. They will often tell you how they find God walking on beaches or hiking on trails — most often at sunset. What deep insight to think that God is found in sunsets! Oh, what hope and comfort from the depths of insight of such a "spiritual but not religious" person.

Please. That is as boring as it is vacuous. Give me good ol'-fashioned Christianity with its realism and not the virtual Meta world of Mark Zuckerberg! Give me reality when talking about man's degradation and the corruption of sin. Give me Christian teaching that distinguishes between the holiness of God and the wickedness of man. Let me hear the truth that there is nothing that I can do on my own to overcome this sin within me, for what I do is pile sin upon sin.

Let me hear the hope that reaches back not 10 years but thousands, back tonight almost to the beginning, back to the primordial garden, and the Gospel promise made there. Let me hear how God Himself would take action on our behalf that we sinners are incapable of doing.

Let me hear from prophets and apostles, saints and angels. Let that great cloud of witnesses tell me God's promises and His fulfillment ...

Tell me of the offspring of woman who would crush the head of our ancient enemy who deceived our first parents and caused mankind's downfall.

Tell me of the offspring of Abraham who would be a blessing to all nations, Jew and Gentile.

Tell me of the child who would sprout forth from the line of Jesse and of his son David who will deal with us with His own righteousness, with the justice He would establish for us, with faithfulness to His own promise.

Tell me of the child born unto us, by whose life we see light in the midst of our darkness; tell me of the Son, a Prince, given to bring us peace.

Tell me of the Messiah promised of old, fulfilled in a little baby boy miraculously conceived by the Spirit, born of a virgin, just as God had said.

Tell me of this son of David born in a little Judean town of Bethlehem, as foretold by prophets.

Let me hear the comforting message of the angel proclaiming the cosmic significance of this lowly birth in a stable among ox and ass: *“unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”*

Let me join the angel chorus in singing: *“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”*

And knowing the story of mankind’s salvation, not something made up only recently, not something discovered in ones own narcissistic self-reflection, not even something found in sunsets, but revealed to us in the pages of Holy Writ, let us this night sing heartily of our hope and joy in Christ Jesus who, we remember this night, entered into our flesh.

But in four short months we will again trod with Christ to the cross where He completes His divine mission to save us. These are inseparable — incarnation and cross. Which is perhaps why this Christmas hymn — *What Child Is This* — is so much loved. It puts it all together: *“Why lies He in such mean estate Where ox and ass are feeding? Good Christians fear; for sinners here [in the manger] The silent Word is pleading. Nails, spear shall piece Him through, The cross be borne for me, for you. Hail, hail the Word the made flesh, The babe, the son of Mary!”* (LSB370)

Unlike the shepherds, you and I have the full story, a marvelous story, a Divine story, a comforting story of our redemption. How much more so then should we, as we go forth from here, make like the shepherds and make *“known the [things revealed to us] concerning this child,”* for He, not we, is the focus of true spirituality; and His light still shines as brightly as ever! Blessed Christmas!

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.