

Although December 25 may have been etched in our minds as the birthday of Jesus when we were children, the actual date of Jesus' birth is unknown. Nor do we know when the church started celebrating Christmas as a holy day. Over three centuries came and went before December 25 was established as the date for Christmas.

During that time, five cities emerged as centers for church oversight around the Mediterranean: Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, Alexandria, and Constantinople. There is at least "one record of Christmas being celebrated in Antioch (Turkey) on December 25 in the middle of the second century."¹ But there is no record of Christmas "being observed on that date in Rome until the year 336... In 350... Pope Julius I declared December 25 the official date"² for celebrating Jesus' birth.

The first chapter of John's Gospel speaks abstractly about Christmas. Jesus is described as God's Word made flesh: his birth reveals how "the true light, which enlightens everyone was coming into the world."

Celebrations of light in late December in the northern hemisphere had been taking place for many centuries before the church began. Ancient people, like people today, craved relief from the cold and the dark. John's metaphor of Jesus as the light shining in the darkness may have inspired church leaders to add a new holiday to the existing winter festivals. So there were both scriptural and cultural reasons to celebrate the birth of Jesus during early winter.

In the northern hemisphere, the days on each side of the winter solstice, which was last Wednesday, are the shortest ones in the year. During winter, the farther north you go, the shorter the days are - until you reach the Arctic Circle, where there is no direct sunlight at all right now. But those of us who live between the Arctic Circle and the equator already have begun to gain a few seconds of precious daylight each day. The days will continue to gradually lengthen until summer begins.

This morning, I want to share with you what has been called "the first Christmas sermon," although it probably is just the first Christmas sermon of record. It was delivered in Antioch in the year 386.

¹ Michael McCann, "Christmas Day: December 25th Wasn't the First Choice" at <http://www.globalbusinesscafe.com/>.

² *Ibid.*

Antioch was founded by one of Alexander the Great's generals some three hundred years before Jesus was born. From its founding through most of its history, Antioch was part of Syria. By the first century, Antioch had grown to have a population of around half a million people. It was the third largest city in the world then: Rome was the largest, and Alexandria, Egypt, was the second largest. The book of Acts tells us that "it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians.'" (Acts 11:26) St. Paul began his missionary travels from Antioch. Ancient Antioch's ruins are near Turkey's border with Syria. The unfortunate city of Aleppo, where so many battles in Syria's five-year civil war have been fought, is only seventy miles east of Antioch, or Antakya. Aleppo is one of the world's oldest cities, having been founded four or five thousand years before the birth of Jesus.

Our preacher in Antioch in 386 was a recently ordained priest in his thirties. We now call him St. John Chrysostom. Chrysostom was not his real name, but is a Greek word that means "golden-tongued." This name was applied to him later in the 6th century. In Chrysostom's day, as a consequence of earthquakes and warfare, Antioch's population had shrunk to around 200,000, half of whom were Christian. Traditionally, Chrysostom is regarded as the church's greatest preacher. He later became the patriarch of Constantinople. The church there traces its roots to our congregation's namesake, St. Andrew. Today, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople is the leader for the world's second largest church composed of 300 million Orthodox Christians.

What follows is the homily St. John Chrysostom preached on Christmas morning sixteen hundred and thirty years ago in Antioch, seventy miles west of Aleppo:

"Behold a new and wondrous mystery. My ears resound to the Shepherd's song, piping no soft melody, but chanting full forth a heavenly hymn. The Angels sing. The Archangels blend their voice in harmony. The Cherubim hymn their joyful praise. The Seraphim exalt His glory. All join to praise this holy feast, beholding the Godhead here on earth, and man in heaven. He who is above, now for our redemption dwells here below; and he that was lowly is by divine mercy raised.

Bethlehem this day resembles heaven; hearing from the stars the singing of angelic voices; and in place of the sun, enfolds within itself on every side, the Sun of justice. And ask not how: for where God wills, the order of nature yields. For He willed, He had the power, He descended, He redeemed; all things yielded in obedience to God. This day He who is, is Born; and he who is, becomes what He was not. For when He was God, He became man; yet not departing from the Godhead that is His. Nor yet by any loss of divinity became He man, nor through increase became He God from man; but being the Word He became flesh, His nature, because of impassability, remaining unchanged.

So the kings have come, and they have seen the heavenly King that has come upon the earth, not bringing with Him Angels, nor Archangels, nor Thrones, nor Dominations, nor Powers, nor Principalities, but treading a new and solitary path, He has come forth from a spotless womb.

Since this heavenly birth cannot be described, neither does His coming amongst us in these days permit of too curious scrutiny. Though I know that a Virgin this day gave birth, and I believe that God was begotten before all time, yet the manner of this generation I have learned to venerate in silence and I accept that this is not to be probed too curiously with wordy speech. For with God we look not for the order of nature, but rest our faith in the power of Him who works.

What shall I say to you; what shall I tell you? I behold a Mother who has brought forth; I see a Child come to this light by birth. The manner of His conception I cannot comprehend.

Nature here rested, while the Will of God labored. O ineffable grace! The Only Begotten, Who is before all ages, Who cannot be touched or be perceived, Who is simple, without body, has now put on my body, that is visible and liable to corruption. For what reason? That coming amongst us he may teach us, and teaching, lead us by the hand to the things that men cannot see. For since men believe that the eyes are more trustworthy than the ears, they doubt of that which they do not see, and so He has deigned to show Himself in bodily presence, that He may remove all doubt.

Christ, finding the holy body and soul of the Virgin, builds for Himself a living temple, and as He had willed, formed there a man from the Virgin; and, putting Him on, this day came forth; unashamed of the lowliness of our nature. For it was to Him no lowering to put on what He Himself had made.

Let that handiwork be forever glorified, which became the cloak of its own Creator. For as in the first creation of flesh, man could not be made before the clay had come in God's hand, so neither could this corruptible body be glorified, until it had first become the garment of its Maker.

What shall I say! And how shall I describe this Birth to you? For this wonder fills me with astonishment. The Ancient of days has become an infant. He who sits upon the sublime and heavenly Throne, now lies in a manger. And He who cannot be touched, who is simple, without complexity, and incorporeal, now lies subject to the hands of men. He who has broken the bonds of sinners, is now bound by an infant's bands. But He has decreed that dishonor shall become honor, infamy be clothed with glory, and total humiliation the measure of His Goodness.

For this He assumed my body, that I may become capable of His Word; taking my flesh, He gives me His spirit; and so He bestowing and I receiving, He prepares for me the treasure of Life. He takes my flesh, to sanctify me; He gives me His Spirit that He may save me.

Come, then, let us observe the Feast. Truly wondrous is the whole chronicle of the Nativity. For this day the ancient slavery is ended, the devil confounded, the demons take to flight, the power of death is broken, paradise is unlocked, the curse is taken away, sin is removed from us, error driven out, truth has been brought back, the speech of kindness diffused, and spreads on every side, a heavenly way of life has been in planted on the earth, angels communicate with men without fear, and men now hold speech with angels.

Why is this? Because God is now on earth, and man in heaven; on every side all things commingle. He became Flesh. He did not become God. He was God. Wherefore He became flesh, so that He Whom heaven did not contain, a manger would this day receive. He was placed in a manger, so that He, by whom all things are nourished, may receive an infant's food from His Virgin Mother. So, the Father of all ages, as an infant at the breast, nestles in the virginal arms, that the Magi may more easily see Him. Since this day the Magi too have come, and made a beginning of withstanding tyranny; and the heavens give glory, as the Lord is revealed by a star.

To Him, then, who out of confusion has wrought a clear path, to Christ, to the Father, and to the Holy Ghost, we offer all praise, now and forever. Amen.”³

I'll add a little information about our Hymn of the Day. Its author, Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius, was born in 348, one year before Chrysostom. So both of them were babies when the pope declared December 25 to be Christmas Day in 350. A commentary on “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” notes that its original Latin text “begins ‘Corde natus ex parentis,’ or ‘Of the parent sole begotten.’ That is, the more inclusive name of ‘parent’ for God is in the earlier Latin text.”⁴ Chrysostom’s sermon and Prudentius’ hymn celebrate the holy mystery of God’s Word becoming human in Jesus. For us now, they are both, in words Prudentius used for his predecessors, “seers in old time” who point us toward Jesus, who is the Savior “evermore and evermore! Amen.”

³ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/billykangas/2009/12/st-john-chrysostom-homily-on-christmas-morning.html>.

⁴ Paul Westermeyer, *Hymnal Companion to Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Augsburg Fortress, 2010, p. 76.