

THE SOLEMNITY OF THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD (CHRISTMAS)

December 25, 2021

Isaiah 9:1–6 • Titus 2:11–14 • Luke 2:1–14

I.

“In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.”

Historians surmise that Columbus made landfall somewhere in the present-day Bahamas.

He called the place *San Salvador*: “Holy Savior.”

Later on that same voyage,
Columbus sailed across the northern coast of a place he christened
La Isla Española: “The Spanish Island.”

Today, *Hispaniola*, as it’s called,
is shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

Columbus’s expedition was made up of those three famous ships:
the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa María*.

Near the present-day city of Cap Haitien, Haiti,
the *Santa María* ran aground.

It was Christmas Day: December 25, 1492.

From the timbers of his flagship,
Columbus constructed a settlement
for 39 members of his crew whom he left there.

Columbus called the fort *La Navidad*:
“Nativity”—Christmas.

II.

Beyond its chronological significance,
the name of that first European settlement in the Americas
is a fitting theological symbol:

God rescues shipwrecked humanity by assuming the “timbers”
of our frail mortal nature.

This is what we commemorate at Christmas:

Not only the fact of Christ’s birth in Bethlehem,
but its meaning:

God became one of us,
sharing our humanity completely—except for sin.

This is what we call the Incarnation,
which we profess in the Creed:

“And by the Holy Spirit [he] was **incarnate** of the Virgin Mary,
and became man.”

This is what the angel proclaims to the shepherds on the outskirts of Bethlehem:

“A savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.
And this will be a sign for you:
you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes
and lying in a manger.”

In the New Testament drama of salvation history,
Christmas is the second act.

Christ’s birth in Bethlehem made visible the humanity
he had assumed at his conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary—
the first act.

The Son of God's entrance into the world
made it possible for him to suffer, die on the Cross,
and be raised from the dead—
these are the decisive acts of salvation history.

Therefore, on Christmas,
the crib already points to the Cross.

Here, I think of the second verse—
which is often forgotten—
of my favorite Christmas carol, "What Child Is This."

That verse, which we will sing tonight, goes like this:

"Nails, spear shall pierce Him through,
The cross be borne for me, for you.
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,
The Babe, the Son of Mary."

Out of love for us,
God not only shared our humanity,
but he also elevated it,
enabling us to share in his own life in heaven.

That was the result of the Cross and Resurrection,
which the Incarnation made possible.

Tonight's Preface to the Eucharistic Prayer declares that,

"Through [Christ] the holy exchange that restores our life
has shone forth today in splendor:
when our frailty is assumed by your Word
not only does human mortality receive unending honor
but by this wondrous union we, too, are made eternal."

III.

Columbus's first settlement, like human nature, was frail.

The explorer left soon after the fort was constructed,
and returned the following year, in November 1493.

Columbus found *La Navidad* burnt down and abandoned.

The settlers had turned on one another,
and died in skirmishes with the indigenous inhabitants.

Humanity—each of us—
needs to be rescued from sin,
and we need a “settlement” that will endure.

God has come among us.

Jesus Christ has settled in our midst.

He is with us forever,
and by his death and resurrection,
he has overcome sin and death,
giving us the possibility of new life.

Christ continues to be active in the world;
he has never left us,
and he never will.

In the words of St. Paul to Titus,
from the Second Reading,

“The grace of God has appeared, saving all
and training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires
and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age.”

The power of God is active, and it can transform us.

This is the meaning of going to Bethlehem,
of kneeling before the manger
and adoring the Christ Child:
going deeper in our relationship with God.

“For today in the city of David
a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.”

Merry Christmas.