

Letter to a Prisoner

Praying at sunrise. Be patient and be the surf!

Is Jesus speaking symbolically or literally about His flesh in John, Chapter 6? Yes.

Reminiscences of Elder Dobri Dobrev

BE MINDFUL OF DEATH

God Has Entered the Bosom of Human Life - St. Justin of Chelije

Emmanuel – “God is with us” – means we will never again be lonely.

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Priest Seraphim Holland, PO 37, McKinney TX 75070; General Letter Nov 26/ Dec 8 2019

Dear brothers and sisters: This letter should be sent while I'm traveling. If it is mailed when I expect it to be, I will be in Uganda by the time you receive it. I will still pray for you every day. I hope that there will be a letter each Monday, and that 1. You will respond and 2. I will be able to write some current stuff in the letters. God bless you and help you in all things.



The pictures are an hour before sunrise, about a half-hour before sunrise and when I mistakenly thought the sun was going to rise, and exactly at sunrise, at Vilano beach, St. Augustine Florida, Friday, Nov 29. I am staying there with my entire family because we had a family reunion over Thanksgiving to see Marina's parents. It is probably the last time on this earth that all of us will be together. One of my favorite things to do is to see the sunrise, and to go to the beach. I combined them this morning. I love to go out to the beach way before the sun has risen when it's still dark. I bring my flashlight and prayer rope, and I pray, and I watch the sky.

Arriving in the darkness, it is "quiet" in a spiritual way. The surf is loud, but there is a certain peacefulness, and calm expectation. We all know that the sun is going to rise. In the darkness, it does not yet seem like things are taking a long time. I hear the surf, and see only a little, and pray, facing the waves, and sometimes walking. It is easy to wait at this time.

There is light more than an hour before the sun rises. It is exciting to see the light grow at first, because the changes are dramatic. But after 30 minutes, the changes are not very dramatic. It is light enough to read the Psalter, but there is no sun. It gets progressively lighter, but the changes are very subtle, but I still do not see the sun. Finally, the sun rises a little tiny bit over the horizon, within two minutes the entire sun is showing. During this entire time, the waves have not stopped, indeed they are actually getting bigger, because the tide is coming in. No matter what the time of day, the waves make their way to shore and back out to the ocean again. They never stop. It doesn't matter if the sun is up or down, if it is light or if it is dark.

I find spiritual metaphors in all of these things. I like expectation. I think the power of the Christian life is found in expectation, and a calm certainty concerning what it to come. We call this “hope”. All is not always quiet in our hoping. There is the crush of life, with its temptations, and joys and sorrows. Sometimes things seem to be very light, but there is still darkness. There is light, but not enough light! I feel this often in my soul, in the world, in those I am the unworthy minister of. It seems like certain changes are taking a long time! The appearance of the sun - our deliverance from our passions, and the worries of the world, and the sadness, seems to be taking an overly long time. I think the majority of our earthly life after baptism is lived in this state, with brightness increasing slowly, but not yet seeing the sun.

Sometimes I feel a certain despair, such as when I looked out at the horizon a half hour before the sunrise, and it did not look like it had changed much for a very long time. I knew the sun was coming, but it was taking a long time! This despair is a common condition of the soul. It is not unbelief. It is born out of fatigue, and it is because we lack wisdom and patience. It seems that the only way to gain patience is to encounter many things that make us impatient, and the only way to gain wisdom is to learn from our foolish mistakes. The positive changes in our life are evident – there is light – but there is not yet the sun. During this time of despair, I prayed the Jesus prayer, and felt better.

We must find times of relative calmness in our life, when we truly pray, or the moments of despair will become longer, and devilishly, less acute. We will be sleepy and worldly, and not know it. I search for time in each day to pray with stillness. Of course, my soul’s version of stillness would look like a tempest to a holy man, but God deals with our souls in a relative way. He takes my “busy” offer of stillness and pray and He magnifies it. He is like a Father, helping his child – the child *thinks* he is working very hard, or doing very well, but the Father is actually helping him more than he knows. In the rare times that I (a landlocked Texan) am alone with the pounding surf, and the rising of the sun, I feel this help more intensely. I want to remember this feeling, because back at home, or in prison, or in Africa, or wherever my body is, there will be temptations and distractions and difficulties, and I may not feel His presence as intensely. But if I remember that I have felt Him, many times, it will be enough.

During the entire time I awaited the rising of the sun, the surf continued on its way. Dark or light, rain or shine, the surf continues. We must be like the surf. We must pray, and seek after our sweet Father’s commandments, no matter what our external difficulties are. This is a learned skill. We learn a skill by constant effort in developing that skill. Be like the surf. Find time in the day to pray with as much stillness as you can muster. Make that stillness and earnest pray a daily constant in your life.

In my life, I find that rising early, before the business of the day begins, to say the Jesus prayer, and chant the Psalter, and then do my commemorations, is the best time for stillness. You may have a different time. Find it! In prison, it is *more* quiet in the wee hours of the morning, before breakfast chow. Perhaps you can use this time for (relative) stillness. Be careful to *be the surf*, but not be carried along by the surf of life, passively. There is no dignity or honor, or stillness, in being carried about by the cares of life.

It occurred to me just now that the night of the Lord’s Nativity was a similar moment to the one I just described. All was quiet and still, and the shepherd and Joseph and the Most pure Theotokos felt the holiness and peace. There was a certain clarity, which I am sure they remembered during the times of great temptation and sadness that occurred during Jesus ministry. Search for those times of clarity and peace, and remember them!

In our church, we are trying to get people to understand and long for communion. That would mean that they attend church more regularly, commune more regularly and prepare more carefully. Here is an excerpt, which I’ve transcribed from one of the sermons.

Is Jesus speaking symbolically or literally about His flesh in John, Chapter 6? Yes.

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About 2.5 minutes. Did Jesus speak symbolically about his flesh in John 6? For those who rely on scripture only for proof, the answer is in His answer to the Jews when it became obvious that many were disputing Him, and disbelieving that He could give His flesh to eat. In John 6, the Lord brings His people along a progression, from symbolic to more explicit language, and when they "connected the dots" and understood that He was speaking about giving His actual flesh to eat, He responded to the controversy in clear, irrefutable language. The biblical evidence is clear (and of course, the consistent practice and belief of the church for over 2000 years believes this language). The Lord at first spoke symbolically, then explicitly, in order to address a dispute that started with some of the Jews that heard Him, and continues to this day. John 6:51-54 Excerpt from the homily: http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/misc_2019+holy-communion-in-john-6.mp3



“This is the bread which cometh from heaven that a man may eat thereof and not die” (John 6:50)

Do you see how He is getting a little more specific now? There is a progression – He is moving from symbolic to literal language.

“I am the living bread” - now, He’s not just the bread from heaven – “I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (John 6:51-52)

Let’s address those who would like to interpret this symbolically, and say that everything Jesus taught in this discourse is symbolic language, mostly because they say something like this: “How can you eat flesh, how can you literally eat a person's body?”

The Lord can do anything He wishes. The Lord can raise the dead; the Lord created the world. Can a reasonable person not think that He *can* give us of His flesh to eat? That’s a pretty easy thing for Him to do.

There was a conflict about this, and the Jews were saying how can He do this?, so He answers them: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.” (John 6:53)

Let's be sensible here! This is enough proof to say that what we do in the church - when we take the bread and the wine and pray that the Holy Spirit will come upon the gifts and change them into the body and blood of Chris - that it happens! Of course, it's been the practice of the church from the beginning. This is a proof right here, that's all you really need. If you want scriptural proof,



there it is.

He said that He is the bread of life, He said you must eat of this bread, and they understand that He was telling them that they must eat of His flesh - that's crazy to them - and then He answers them absolutely explicitly and says: "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day". (John 6:53-54)

That's very explicit. Now it's important of course that we believe it, if we are Orthodox Christians, we believe it. Is one of the things we believe. That wasn't can say we believe about the creed, we believe about the virgin birth, and that God is a Trinity of persons: all these things we believe. We can say this too: we believe that when the priest before the altar and calls down the Holy Spirit, that indeed the Holy Spirit changes ordinary bread and ordinary wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ. It has the appearance of bread and wine but it is in actuality also the body and blood of Jesus Christ, and that we partake of this body and blood because if we don't, we have no life in us as the Lord taught us.

Reminiscences of Elder Dobri Dobrev

Sofia, February 16, 2018

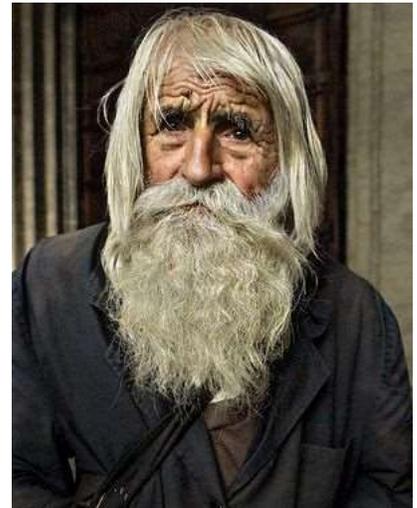
A reader of OrthoChristian.com wrote to us to offer some words on the [newly-departed Elder Dobri Dobrev](#), "The Saint of Bailovo," who devoted his life as a sacrifice to the glory of God in His Orthodox Church. His touching reflection incorporates his own experience with the elder, as well as that of his friends.

"Pray to your guardian angel Guardian! He helps and prays to God for you!"

That's what Grandpa Dobri told me when I saw him once in the narthex of the St. Alexander Nevsky Church. My friend Georgi Germanov also wanted to meet him, and it happened in a marvelous way, again in the narthex of this largest church, whose largest donor was this old-fashioned grandpa.

He looks like he comes from another century, and he *was* from another age: from the future we all await. He is an example that we will never forget and gave advice that will be as carved on stone slabs in our hearts.

These days we're all repeating that the memory of Grandpa Dobri will not be forgotten. Is it really so? When we think of this man who taught us the good, and not only because that was his name, but because his deeds spoke more than his words, which were sometimes incomprehensible.



Many people say that Grandpa Dobri is a saint, that he is prophetic, that he foretells things. Some have even experienced such things. My close friend told me once when he went to the service, and received Holy Communion at the Liturgy. Then, they left the church and went for coffee. Afterwards, they returned to the Patriarchal Cathedral to light a candle, and there was Grandpa Dobri, humbly standing by the entrance and collecting pennies. The boys gave him some money and kissed his hand.

"Read your after-Communion prayers! You have to thank God for honoring you," Grandpa Dobri told my friend, without actually knowing that he had taken Holy Communion. These things happen sometimes.

They told me that when they asked Grandpa Dobri why he bowed to every man who met him. "Everyone has a guardian angel. I bow to his guardian angel and ask him to pray for the man," Grandpa Dobri answered.

The old man from Bailovo walked on foot to Sofia, and then, in old age, he also went by bus. Now there's no way to think about whether someone else will be born like Grandpa Dobri. I do not know. Perhaps. I know, however, that he will continue to be an example of kindness and sacrifice, because that is humility: to sacrifice yourself for others. God rest his soul!

And do not forget to say a prayer for us, for those who wanted to see and hear him. May be one day we will meet again and talk more. I hope.

Angel Karadako

BE MINDFUL OF DEATH

Die every day, and you will live forever. St. Antony the Great.

Being mindful of death is a virtue that ordinary people practice rarely, but it is something of which the Fathers speak a great deal in the Philokalia. It is one of man's most productive capabilities. It only seems to us that contemplating death will drive us mad. In fact, people are afraid to think about death because overall, they are afraid to live. In our day, it has become customary to spend time, but not to live. People not only spend time, but even think that there is time to kill. On the one hand, it seems to us that we do not have enough time, and on the other, we think that there is too much, as it is boring. To live mindful of death is frightening because bearing it in mind means changing everything. One needs to treasure every moment, spend every hour productively, filling it with profound significance.



I remember that Metropolitan Antony of Sourozh, recollecting his mother's death, said that the year she died was the happiest one in their relationship. When her grave illness would end was an unknown, and every day, as they met as if for the last time, it was important for them to show one another the full measure of their love. They knew that tomorrow, they might no longer have that chance.

When one lives mindful of death, his life changes completely. If today is the last day of your life, it is of course foolish to sin. It is foolish to waste time doing crossword puzzles or reading mysteries. It is foolish to curse or to argue. It is foolish to take offense at other people. What is the point of taking offense if you are living your last day; it is better to forgive and to fill the time with kindness and love. If one does sin during that day, he will not tarry, but will immediately repent, will immediately come to ask forgiveness. And this is how he will be every day throughout his life, until his death. When one finds within himself the courage to live this way, his life becomes very productive, very happy, very fulfilling. He treasures every minute. Whether praying, or talking with others, writing poetry or painting pictures, inventing or building, he understands that perhaps this is his final opportunity to do something useful on this earth, to work for the good of his neighbor. Thus, for him, everything acquires a new significance. That is what being mindful of death is. Being mindful of death can invigorate and fill our prayer rule.

Sleep is a form of death, a departure from life, and our evening prayers are those of profound repentance and reconciliation. In one of the morning prayers, we read: "When the Judge of all will come with glory to render to each according to their deeds. May we not be found fallen and idle, but awake and alert for action, ready to accompany Him into the joy and divine palace of His glory, where there is the ceaseless sound of those keeping festival..." This poetic and profound prayer, composed by St. Basil the Great, contains a very important thought —the thought of how man is to approach the Dread Judgment. St. Basil the Great refers to life as "night," and says that the day and the coming of Christ is at hand. That prayer is an eschatological exclamation, the call of the Kingdom of Heaven. Just as the Divine Scriptures conclude with the words, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus (Revelation 22:20), and as we appeal in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom come..." —so the principal idea

expressed in the prayer of St. Basil the Great concludes with those words, only expressed with a sense of profound theological awareness. In [that prayer] it is quite evident that each morning a Christian prepares to meet God and that each day may become the day on which he stands before the Judgment. We must understand that each and every time we begin a new day, we move toward God, and that in so doing we may well come to the Dread Judgment. We Christians await the day when the Judge will come and will render to each according to his deeds; thus let us go out, fully waking and vigilant, to meet our Savior. (Excerpted from Archbishop Alexei Uminsky's book *The Mystery of Reconciliation*, Danilovsky Blagovestnik, Moscow, 2007.)

God Has Entered the Bosom of Human Life

Nativity of Christ 1970 - St. Justin of Chelije

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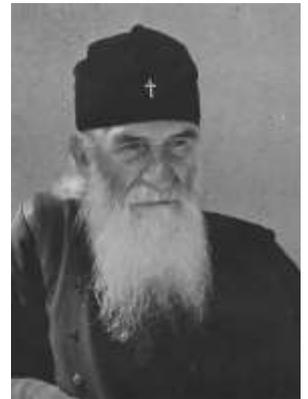
Christ is Born! Truly, God has been born as Man, on earth! Why? "That we might live through Him" (I John 4: 9). For without the Incarnate God, the God-Man Lord Jesus Christ, human life is overall, a completely suicidal absurdity; death is truly the most obvious and awful absurdity on earth.

To comprehend death is to comprehend life - all of the height and depth, the boundless eternity - of life. This is something accomplished only by the All-man-loving Lord, Who in His immeasurable love becomes man, while ever remaining God Incarnate, God-Man in the world of man. Human life acquires its eternal meaning, its purpose, as Divine-life, life in God.

Outside of God, life is absurd and utter nonsense, filled to overflowing with offense and bitterness. Only in God, O man, does your life find its sole rational, logical meaning. And your intelligence, my brother, your human thought, finds its Divine and eternal meaning only in God, only as Divine- intelligence. It is only in the God-Man Lord Jesus Christ that Human thought becomes Divine intelligence.

Likewise, only in God do your senses, O man, find their Divine, eternal purpose. Lacking that, your senses are but your most merciless torturer, constantly crucifying you on an eternal cross, with no resurrection to follow.

And your conscience? Where do we people find this savage stranger? It is only through Divine conscience that it unites itself with its divine, eternal, purpose. Without it, human conscience is also a savage and terrible absurdity.



And your death and mine, everyone's death overall: in all of Creation, is it not the cruelest torture within human existence? Yes, that is truly so. Yet even it achieves its eternal meaning and purpose only through the death and Resurrection of the God-Man, our Lord Jesus Christ, for through Him, through Him alone, is the victory over death accomplished, and does death in the human world have meaning.

Likewise, it is only as the good and grace-filled God-Man, in the worshipping and all-quickening Body of Christ the Incarnate God - the Church - that all mankind, all humanity in its infinite variety, discovers its Divine, eternal, Godly and human higher meaning.

With His Incarnation, becoming Man, God entered, most patently entered into the womb, the bosom of human life, entered into the blood, the heart, and the center of all existence. Through His Incarnation, by becoming Man, God, Whom man

had voluntarily crowded out of the human world, out of the human soul, comes back into the world, into the body, into the soul. He becomes fully Man, and being Him, labors for man, makes his abode in the world, in the midst of His Creation; He saves Creation, exercises His Providence over Creation, sanctifies and saves Creation, transfigures and deifies Creation.

God's Incarnation is the greatest, most staggering, and most providential event to have occurred either on earth or in Heaven, for in [the Incarnation] the miracle of miracles is accomplished. If, to date, the greatest miracle had been the creation of the world out of nothing, God's Incarnation as Man surely surpasses it as a miracle. If in the creation of the world, God's words were transformed into matter, in the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, God Himself took on a body and became matter, became flesh. Thus, God's Incarnation became providential for each individual, for each creature throughout all Creation.

As for you: live in Him, live in God-Man, and you will be healed of all deaths, sins, passions, and of every work of the devil. Let your life become Divine-life. In that, O man, as soon as you become a member of the Church, a member of the Divine-human Body of Christ, rests all of the Mystery of Heaven on earth: And how does one live in the Church of Christ? **Live by the Holy Mysteries and the Holy Virtues.**

This is why the Feast of the Nativity is preceded by a Fast. Fasting is the first among the virtues, and is always accompanied by prayer. Those two fundamental virtues lead man to God-Man, and through Divine Wisdom teach him how to live by Him and in Him.

And what is to be done with the body given you by God? - Purify it, free it from all uncleanness, from all passion, from all evil, from every demon. What does that mean? It means to purify it of every sin, for the devil hides in any sin, in every sin the devil works without regard to your free will. In great sins, it is prince of demons, in little sins, a little demon. You and I and everyone else, have been given all of the resources with which to defeat all of those demons, all of the passions, all of the sins, all of the deaths in us and in the world around us. First and foremost among those resources are prayer and fasting. From the truthful lips of the Lord Jesus Christ, who always speaks the real Truth, [we hear] the life-giving truth: "This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting." (Matthew 17: 21), - "this kind" of all manner of sins, all manner of passions, all manner of demons.

Lying before you and me, before all of us, brothers and sisters, is the Nativity: God is born as a person "so that we might receive life through Him" and so that through God we might perfect both soul and body. That is something easiest to achieve through prayer and fasting, which cleanse and purify both body and soul, so that the sweetest Divine Infant, our Lord Jesus, might joyously come to dwell in them, and that by God our human essence, in all its infinite variety might be fulfilled and perfected. For that was why your body and your soul, O man, were created, so that they might be fulfilled through God and [you] might live in God in God's kingdom above.

Our God-given teachers in this matter are humble prayer and fasting with humility. They are sacred and fundamental virtues found in the Gospels. May they soar with us, may they anticipate and proclaim to us and to all people throughout Creation the all-salvific and all-joyous Good News: **Christ is born!**

Emmanuel – “God is with us” – means we will never again be lonely.

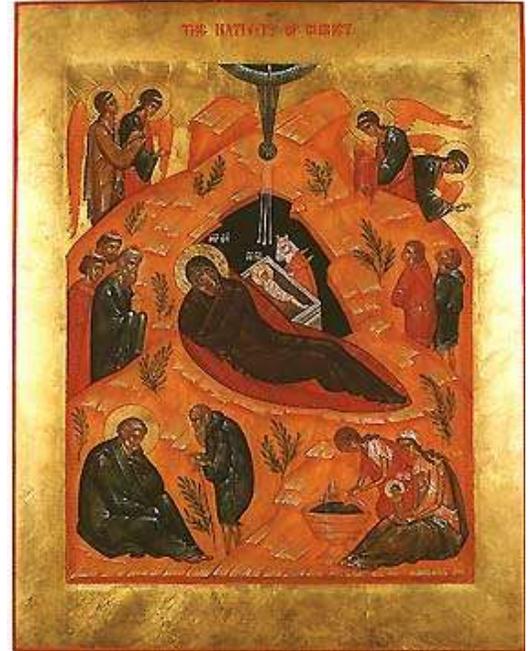
Nativity of the Savior - Dec 25 2017 / Jan 7 2018

Synopsis: The meaning of Nativity is described in one word – “Emmanuel”, which means “God is with us”. Man was made to be with God, always, but sin made him lonely. God became man – so that He would be us – so that He would be with us – so that we would be able to never be lonely again.

“For God is with us know ye nations and be vanquished for God is with us.”

That is from one of my favorite hymns. It’s from Great Compline, which we sang last night. “God is with us”, in one word is - “Emmanuel”. Jesus Christ is called Emmanuel: **“Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.”** (Matthew 1:23) This is the meaning of Nativity, that God is with us.

In the garden God was with Adam and Eve. He walked with them and He talked with them face-to-face. They were never *lonely*, they were never *frightened*, they were never *confused*. And then sin happened, and when God walked in the garden they were *afraid* and they hid themselves from Him. This is what sin does. It estranges us from God. It is not that God doesn’t want to walk in the garden with us, it is that we cannot see God face-to-face because of our sins.



And God could not abide that, because He created us to be eternal and to be with Him at all times – to never be *lonely*, to never be *sad*, to never be *confused* – to only be pure and full of *knowledge* and *goodness* and *happiness*.

But because of sin (we well know) that does not always happen. So what God did, as a mutual decision of the Trinity (because they always decide everything together, the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit) is decide that the Father would send His only begotten Son, the Son who was begotten before ages, Light of Light, True God of True God, Who created the universe – He would send His Son down to be with us, and to become a man just like us. So now and forever, God truly is with us, and the reason He was with us in history is so that we could be with Him in eternity.

Have you ever observed when a small child is frightened or maybe they get a small boo-boo? What do they do? They immediately look for their mother, and in some cases their father, and they run to their mother or father, and then they are better. They might cry little bit, but they are comforted and then they go off and play. When they are injured they are very *lonely*.

One of my children would start to cry, and if nobody was there she stopped until she got where mom or dad was, and then she started to cry again. Remember that Natalie? Come on, you used to do that, you were very foxy about that. You could actually hold a cry for a minute until you found somebody to cry to.

The reason she did that is because she had some pain, emotional, physical - whatever it was, and she wanted to be comforted. She felt alone, so she ran to someone so she would not feel alone. That is the image of what God wants us to be able to do. That’s why He became man, so that we would not be alone.

Just as a child receives comfort that way, we should receive it, but we’re too complicated, we’re too full of sin, we’re too lazy, we’re too this or too that. We have needs, whatever they are, but we don’t go to God to be comforted. We don’t feel God being with us. We should feel God with us as much as our breath is with us. That’s what Job said; he could feel the Spirit of God in his nostrils. The reason is because of the God men Jesus Christ even before His Incarnation, because he can do all things and bring Himself to people.

But you must be with Him in order for Him to be with you. This is a critical idea.

Everything in life is about God being with you. This is what Nativity is – the Son of God before all ages, decided to be with us, so we should get our comfort from Him.

It's not always easy. Sometimes it's very complicated in life, but basically, it's like a child who needs comfort – that's us. If you're anxious or angry, if things are not going well in life, if you are confused – it's because you are lonely. It's because you are not completely with God, and Jesus Christ became man so that you could be with Him — that is the meaning of Nativity.

Now there's a lot of theology that we could speak about, but that's basically it: To be like a child and to run to God with our needs, and to feel Him to be with us - that is Nativity.

Christ is born!

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ⁱ Job 27:3 “All the while my breath is in me, and the spirit of God is in my nostrils.”