

## THE APPEARANCE OF THE LORD'S SALVATION

Hear again the Word of the Lord on the most holy of nights:

*For it appeared, the Grace of God, bringing Salvation to all men...<sup>1</sup>*

**Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**

Tonight's reading from the Letter to Titus is most fitting for the minutes before the Christian Church in this place begins her twelve day celebration of the Nativity of our Lord. In sixty-four words contained in one long, continuous sentence in the ancient Greek language, St. Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, proclaims the appearance of Jesus the Christ, who came into the world. That sentence fits well with the readings which foretold the appearance of the Lord's salvation from Psalm ninety-six and Isaiah. St. Paul's words also declare a summary and the results of the Lord's birth in a little town outside of Jerusalem. There, in Bethlehem long ago, sheep were pastured to provide lambs for the sin-offerings sacrificed in the Lord's Temple. In the middle of the fields, St. Paul declares:

*The Grace of God appeared, bringing Salvation to all men...<sup>2</sup>*

The sentence literally begins with, *for it appeared!* With verbal imagery which echoes the opening of heaven before the shepherds, St. Paul bursts forth with "It appeared!" What does that mean? It means the Grace of God appeared at a certain time, in a specific place to bring Salvation to all. How fitting it is to hear timeless words resound with the events of the night of the Lord's Nativity. God's purposes have been

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<sup>1</sup> Titus 2:11.

<sup>2</sup> Titus 2:11.

declared from that Holy Birth. Lives have been brought forth from darkness through the proclamations about God's Only-begotten Son. For over 2,000 years, the events of that night have been retold to those who were, or would become, either believers or unbelievers. The final results of the Lord's appearance in our flesh to the most unexpected of eye-witnesses long ago will continue to change hearts, minds, and thoughts, until the Lord is seen by every human ever conceived on the Last Day. This God promises to we who are even now:

*continually waiting for the blessed hope and appearance of the glory of the Great God and Savior of us, Jesus Christ...<sup>3</sup>*

Tonight the Church celebrates the appearance of God in our flesh. From the Epistle, we are given two appearances of the Son of God in which to rejoice. The first is declared in the theme verse you've heard repeated. The second was just declared. Those two manifestations of our Lord have been proclaimed. They may be summarized with this thought:

*God's grace determined to save all humans appeared in Jesus the Christ; Jesus the Christ will appear on the Last Day to all humans; out of them He will gather those who have not rejected His grace.*

Most of the emphasis at this time of year, in our land, appears to be upon the birth of Jesus. Even those who live in a so-called Christian culture have been finding their thoughts directed to that which is thought to be the end of the season – the Christmas Day which begins in just a few minutes. For example, on a local radio station yesterday afternoon, the DJ's focused on playing "all holiday music." During one of the

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<sup>3</sup> Titus 2:13.

breaks, the announcers and call-in guests lamented that the season would be over on the 25<sup>th</sup>! I fear that is how most people in our land think, even many in the Church. If you think Christmas will be over tomorrow, turn from that way of thinking.

Believe that the reason for the Christmas season which begins in moments is given to celebrate appearance of Christ in our flesh was to be your Savior. God's grace has appeared. He was born into this world, conceived without sin – His own or Adam's. He manifested Himself out of God's grace in order to bear your sins into death. He died so that you for whom He came to bring salvation will be among those who will be, on the Last Day, seen for who and what you are in Him. That is, redeemed – bought back – from lawlessness. All your violations of God's Holy Word, including that which you inherited from Adam, Christ Jesus came to wipe away. Jesus appeared in our flesh to take on all that which makes you unclean before God. He did so that He might present you to the Father as one of His special people, united with many other believers in the household of the Faith into eternity. St. Paul declares:

*For the Grace of God appeared, bringing Salvation to all men...*<sup>4</sup>

Make no mistake; the Grace of God which has appeared is none other than Jesus, Son of the Blessed Virgin. St. Paul, in that which seems to be a word-play, declares that Jesus, whose name means "Salvation," or "Savior," is God's Grace to save all people. This meaning for the coming of our Lord is also declared in the angel's words of comfort:

*"All of you, do not fear!  
For, behold, I bring Good News for all of you;*

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<sup>4</sup> *Titus* 2:11.

*(a) great joy which is to be for all the people...<sup>5</sup>*

Yes, God came into His creation as True Man, born of woman, to save all people who have and who will ever live. Since God's birth in our flesh, the Church has had a simple message to declare to everyone. We have the history of multiple eye-witness reports of how God determines to save everyone from sin, death, and hell. That message is, you are saved by God's grace in Christ Jesus. Salvation, forgiveness, and eternal life are God's gifts to people who do not, cannot, and will not, by their own works, thoughts, prayers, decisions, or good deeds, merit His favor. That is shown so nicely as God's Word rings out in the midst of this dark, cold, night, as God declares:

*He gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawlessness and might have cleansed for Himself (a) chosen people zealous for good works.<sup>6</sup>*

That is the meaning of Christ's birth. He gave Himself, to be one with us, though conceived and born without sin. He gave Himself to be placed under the Law for us. He gave Himself to be sin for us, for He was washed in our sins. The Son of God did all this for us to redeem us. That means He has bought us back. He alone paid the price the Holy God demands from everyone who breaks any command and Word of God. That is true whether we are aware of our trespasses against Him and our neighbor or not.

With His own blood, the Son of God and Mary Whose birth we remember tonight, cleanses us from all sin. In a rich and full washing, in the manner in which some of us witnessed last Wednesday, He gives the baptized His purity. From that present

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<sup>5</sup> *Luke 2:10b.*

<sup>6</sup> *Titus 2:14.*

and eternal reality, those who are continually waiting for Jesus' final appearing wait with sure and certain hope. Your hope is grounded in the reality that Jesus came to be born of a woman, to live and die as True Man, to grant you forgiveness, life, and everlasting salvation. Do you see, do you understand, that the appearance of the Son of God in our flesh, born as an infant, named Jesus, means that He came to ransom us?! God says:

*He gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawlessness and might have cleansed for Himself (a) chosen people zealous for good works.<sup>7</sup>*

You have been bought and paid for with the most precious currency – the flesh and blood of the God/Man Jesus the Christ. Since you are His, and free from bondage to the devil, the world, and your own sinful desires, God wills to work good through you. The Word of God declares the zeal for good works which God works in His special/chosen people. God acts on you, and you respond. What good are you called to do, you to whom God has given His only-begotten Son from incarnation to manger, to death, to resurrection, through the Water and the Word?

St. Paul gives many answers in the same letter from which you are hearing tonight. Read the first two chapters of Titus tomorrow afternoon, find there all the things which God wants to do through you. In fact, the text for this Eve of the Nativity of our Lord begins the way it does to draw its hearers back to that which the faithful are called to do because God's grace has appeared, through His Word which is,

*continually training us by discipline, that having said no to the godlessness and to worldly strong desires, we live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present aeon.<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> Titus 2:14.

You are actually free by the Gospel of Jesus' birth into death into eternal life to live just as the Scriptures declare. You are even given the means to continue to do so – the Word of God both in your ears, and in your mouths. Think about the power God has worked among us tonight, in His Service.

In the Word in song, chant, and hymn, voiced without instrumentation, God has taken you back over two millennia to the dark of night in the fields outside Bethlehem. For us, in these words, the heavens are opened, just as they were for the shepherds. We hear the Good News. We respond with the Word of God. We witness anew the birth of the Christ, and sing the songs of the angels. There are no instruments here, just the voices God gave us, and... all the heavenly hosts.

Think of the reality which is unfolding this Eve of the anniversary of our Lord's appearance in our flesh. In truth, every time the Lord's Supper is celebrated, you receive more than the shepherds did in the fields where the sacrificial lambs were tended. You, who eat and drink of the feast of the Lord's Table, partake of priestly food given to you by God from the last sacrificial Lamb. He comes to us with His very body and blood, born of Mary, crucified into death, risen from the dead, ascended and glorified in the heavens. God's Grace Who once appeared in the manger, Who will appear on the Last Day, even now appears veiled under Bread and Wine. Jesus comes to us in His Word. *The glory of the Great God and Savior of us, Jesus Christ is here!* You are truly witnessing the appearance of the Lord's Salvation.

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<sup>8</sup> *Titus 2:12.*

# **The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus**

Christmas Eve Midnight (*Lutheran Service Book* one-year series)

Psalm 96; Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14

December 24-25, 2010

*Pastor Michael A. Morhouse*

**SOLI DEO GLORIA**