

Christmas Midnight, 2015

December 24, 2015

Isaiah 9:2-7

(Text) Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14

Psalm 96

The Grace of God Has Appeared

Grace, Mercy and Peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Merry Christmas! By now, that can't be the first time you've been extended that greeting. The truth of the matter is, by this time tomorrow, such words will scarcely be heard outside the walls of your home and of this church; which of course is a shame. We prepare for weeks if not months for exchanging gifts and cards, we prepare our homes throughout these busy days for Christmas traditions and making memories, and through the weeks of Advent we prepare our hearts for the Baby Jesus. For many, it's a time of excess, of gluttony of one manner or another - which might go to explain why most are more than ready to be done with it all by December 26th.

But by God's grace, we see more than what meets the eye. By God's grace we understand the reason for all the fuss and preparation. By God's grace we hear the true message of this season. By God's grace, we see ... God's grace.

The familiarity, comfort and beauty of tonight's readings underscore the joy, peace and beauty related to this remarkable night; the night which the Father deemed as the fullness of time for sending His son. As the shepherds maintained their vigil to watch, so we maintain our vigil tonight knowing that on this night, to us comes the Babe, the Son of Mary.

Isaiah says

HIS NAME SHALL BE CALLED WONDERFUL, COUNSELOR, MIGHTY GOD, EVERLASTING FATHER, PRINCE OF PEACE.

Luke tells us that unto us

IS BORN THIS DAY IN THE CITY OF DAVID A SAVIOR WHO IS CHRIST THE LORD.

Those are familiar, comforting and beautiful words to be sure. But what of Titus! Be honest, how many of you associate Titus, of all people, with Christmas Eve?!? The shepherds and angels, of course; Mary and Joseph, obviously; Isaiah and Luke – no problem; but Titus? Yeah, Titus.

Titus 101 - Titus apparently was living on the island of Crete around the year AD 68 when he received from Paul the epistle that bears his name. This letter is perhaps one of Paul's final epistles as it is dated by conservative biblical scholars on the same year as his death. The book of Titus is recognized as being a full, albeit short, exposition of the Gospel. In the

passages preceding tonight's text Paul encourages Titus to remain faithful in delivering to the faithful the full message of the Christ. Then in the second chapter he summarizes precisely and accurately what that message is! We begin:

FOR THE GRACE OF GOD THAT BRINGS SALVATION APPEARED FOR ALL MEN, TRAINING US THAT HAVING SAID NO TO UNGODLINESS AND STRONG WORLDLY DESIRES, WE MAY CONTINUE TO LIVE WITH SELF-CONTROL, RIGHTEOUSLY AND GODLY, IN THE PRESENT AGE; EAGERLY WAITING FOR THE BLESSED HOPE, AND THE GLORIOUS APPEARANCE OF THE GREAT GOD AND OUR SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST; WHO GAVE HIMSELF FOR US, THAT HE MIGHT HAVE REDEEMED US FROM ALL LAWLESSNESS, AND MIGHT HAVE CLEANSED FOR HIMSELF A CHOSEN PEOPLE, ZEALOUS FOR GOOD WORKS.

Somehow, Paul manages to pack the incarnation, justification, sanctification and salvation into four tidy verses, and even manages to throw a scoop of eschatology on top in the way of end times prophecy. So how does a lay deacon even attempt to preach on such a full text? Well, through prayer, the promise of the Holy Spirit, pastoral guidance and the lens of the message of Christmas.

To be sure, the Gospel reading delivers the true story of the birth of our Savior in remarkable fullness, and the Old Testament reading reveals the

prophecy and promise of this baby whom we know to be Jesus. This epistle reading, these four verses, pull together the “why” of this miraculous night with a richness that the church fathers, for very good reason, saw fit to include in the Christmas Midnight pericope (or cutting from Scripture). Hear the Word of the Lord:

FOR THE GRACE OF GOD THAT BRINGS SALVATION APPEARED FOR ALL MEN.

God comes to us, all of us, all people, for all times whether they believe it or not. This is a perspective that is paramount not only for this day, but for our theology, our worship and our lives. His loving kindness and his goodness, His grace, is where we –receive our salvation. For it is by grace we are saved. In Christ’s birth we see the manifestation of His grace and the unveiling of His plan of redemption. He comes to be born, that we might be born again. And this salvation, this grace, this gift, is for all.

His Son comes to us, dwells with us, lives among us in this crazy, sinful world. Consider the extent to which our world is broken, fallen and ungodly. Yet He enters. He intervenes. Christ comes, as a baby to be sure, but ultimately as a man – a man who causes us to break free from the desires of this world by way of His becoming sin for us so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God As Paul says to Titus:

TRAINING US THAT HAVING SAID NO TO UNGODLINESS AND STRONG WORLDLY DESIRES

When we look at this word “ungodliness” we need to see it as more than just the opposite of “godliness”, or “likeness to God”. The language leans more to the idea of failing to honor God, not believing, trusting, fearing or surrendering to Him. Think of it as more along the lines of refusal or failure to submit to His godliness – that is, not allowing Him to be God.

These strong worldly desires, this ungodliness; these are our default setting. We don’t have to say “yes” to the devil, the world or our sinful flesh. You and I sin; because we are sinners. Our old Adam does nothing to bring us to God, but yet God comes to us. And He finds us in our sin and trains us. (Hang on, I will speak more of this training...) His grace comes to us both to show us the need for His grace and to train us in it. He trains us to say “no” to ungodliness – to renounce the devil ... in all his works and all his ways.

Consider the baptismal liturgy. Think back to the recent public baptisms in this place. You are free to see God coming to the baptized. Neither infants nor adults reach up to God to meet Him halfway. God is the Actor. He is the One Who delivers, Who redeems, Who adopts. And by the power of His Holy Spirit, the baptized (or those who speak on their behalf if he/she is unable) renounce the devil, and receive the good gifts of God’s grace. Likewise, this

training to renounce worldly desires is not a sign of our own initiative, strength or merit; it is the grace of God active through means and in time. All of that, and more, is God's work of training us. Paul explains:

(THAT) WE MAY CONTINUE TO LIVE WITH SELF-CONTROL, RIGHTEOUSLY AND GODLY, IN THE PRESENT AGE;

In Luther's First Christmas Sermon, he discusses what such living looks like in this present world (This is a longish quote, so bear with me, it is worth hearing):

"He who would live soberly, righteously and godly must expect to meet all manner of enmity and must take up the cross. He must not allow himself to be misled, even though he has to live alone, like Lot in Sodom and Abraham in Canaan, among none but the gluttonous, the drunken, the incontinent, unrighteous, false and ungodly. His environment is world and must remain world. He has to resist and overcome the enticements of earth, censoring worldly desires...Life being subject to so many evils, its only hope is in being led by grace."

By God's grace we live lives of self-control; this means continuing to say "no" to worldly desires. By His grace we live righteously; this means confessing our sins and receiving His blood-bought forgiveness. By His grace our lives are godly, this means allowing the Holy Spirit to equip us to say "no"

to ungodliness – and then to fear and trust God, to “allow Him to be God”. God comes to us sinners, and delivers us from this present age and fills us with hope. This is lived out in us and by us as St. Paul now declares:

EAGERLY WAITING FOR THE BLESSED HOPE, AND THE GLORIOUS APPEARANCE OF THE GREAT GOD AND OUR SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST.

Earlier in Titus, Paul speaks of this “hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began” (Titus 1:2). Who gives us this hope? Who promised us this hope? {Pause} God does. He gives us the hope that He promised. As you listen to Scripture, as you hear and study the Words of God, as the Spirit enables you to understand what is being proclaimed to you ... you are free to discover that God is always the One doing the acting, making the covenants, bringing you gifts.

This hope which He gives us for our lives is of the glorious appearance of His Son – that is, His final coming. We wait eagerly for His appearing; the coming of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ. To help you with that, yesterday, the final words declared to you from this pulpit assured you that “you can wait with hope for the coming of Christ and for His judgment, knowing that His coming will not mean death for you, but eternal life”.

Tonight we celebrate His first coming, mindful of His Final Advent, His eternal Presence with us. But the final time He won't be coming as the Babe,

the son of Mary. It might be amid the cold of winter, it might be when half-spent was the night – or it might not. Regardless, He will come in power and glory.

At the moment of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ's appearing every heart and all things will be revealed. He will bring Satan with all his temptations of worldly desires and ungodliness to nothing. Neither Jesus' greatness nor His godhead will be misunderstood.

That's when God's plan will be brought to completion. In the meantime, He comes to us, and delivers us not just for a time while we struggle here in this present age. Then He will deliver us eternally for the sake of the One who was born this day. Hear this clearly as you await that day: God's grace comes to us in the Baby that was born to die....

WHO GAVE HIMSELF FOR US, THAT HE MIGHT HAVE REDEEMED US
FROM ALL LAWLESSNESS

The message of Christmas is about the shepherds and the angels, it's about the journey and the prophecy, it's about the inn and the manger. But ultimately, it's about the cross – it's about Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins. That's what the Holy Spirit is giving you this Christmas; the gift of faith - the faith in the One who has redeemed us from all lawlessness. That is, those things which we think, say, and do which are contrary to God's Holy

Law; and the things we do not think, say, or do which God's Law commands. From those things, you have been redeemed.

And yet He more than simply approves of us. Amazingly, we are His treasured possession. In Titus, we hear:

AND MIGHT HAVE CLEANSED FOR HIMSELF A CHOSEN PEOPLE,

Hear this: God loves you! He sees nothing wrong with you in Christ. When He looks upon, you are blameless for Jesus' sake. You are holy and pure. You have been bought back and cleansed by the blood of the Lamb. His purifying work allows you to be part of His family. You belong to Him. He has adopted you through your Baptism.

Though through this fallen creation you belong to His judgment, through His grace you are His chosen people, a royal priesthood and a holy nation. As one Church Father, Chrysostom, would have you understand it, if He was willing to save us when we were enemies, what will He not do then when He has approved of us? So then how do we respond? Paul concludes, by saying that we are,

ZEALOUS FOR GOOD WORKS.

But yet we wait, with hope to be sure, but still, we wait. Trained to say "no" to ungodliness we wait. With long-suffering hope of His next appearing we

wait. Believing that He gave himself for us we wait. Blessed by the grace of God in this age and the one to come we wait, zealous for good works.

That means that while we wait, God prepares for us good works. These are not our works. Luther, rightly interpreting the Scripture, would insist that God regards no work as good unless God, by His grace, effects it in us. We are created in Christ for the good works prepared for us. That is how you are free to live your lives – zealous to do these works for one another in grateful response to what He has done for you.

To help us understand how God causes us to be in good works, in the *Lutheran Service Book*, one hymn writer uses this section of Titus 2 as a text for its content. Hear Paul’s words to Titus in these words:

“CHRIST, OUR HUMAN LIKENESS SHARING, HEAVEN’S LOVE ON EARTH PORTRAYED:

CHRIST THE SHEPHERD, TENDING CARING, IN HIS DEATH OUR RANSOM PAID:

CHRIST THE SAVIOR, CHRIST THE SERVANT, BE YOUR LIFE IN US DISPLAYED.”

For this Christ we offer back to God our gifts as they are of prayer, praise and thanksgiving. We give thanks for the One born this day who redeems us from all lawlessness. We praise the One whose grace has appeared among us. And we pray that the Spirit would keep us in the one, true faith.

May God continue to give you His Spirit to strengthen and equip you to live righteous and godly lives for Him and for one another. May He continue to reveal to you all that He has done for you not just this Holy Night, but every day and every night as you eagerly wait in blessed hope for the coming glory. And may you receive God's grace and all His gifts of life and salvation found in the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ.

Finally, may the Peace that passes all understanding, which on this night appeared for all men, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

AMEN

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