

Christmas Eve/December 24, 2020
Titus 2:11-14/The Greatest Gift
Holy Spirit Lutheran Church
Pastor Jerry Stobaugh

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people...”

What is the point of Christmas? For children is all about the presents, of course. Every child likes toys for their own sake and as a sign of their parents’ love. They like all presents, but especially gifts from their parents and other loved ones.

Perhaps slightly more mature people think the gifts and rich food are not so important in themselves, what’s more important is the sharing of good things among friends at Christmastime. Others think even more profoundly that it is good to have a time to celebrate peace, joy and brotherhood in a world of pain and conflict.

But is that all? Does Christmas mean nothing more than a short season to share gifts and food with family and friends, and for the nations of the world to briefly forget their differences?

Christmas certainly means more than that. This evenings text does not refer specifically to the birth of Jesus Christ, but the Incarnation of our Lord and Savior which began with His birth.

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people...” means nothing less than the Word made flesh in Christ Jesus. This salvation was earned by Christ alone through His holy life, suffering and death on the cross and His glorious resurrection. This is the source of joy, peace and good will for those who believe in Christ. This is the celebration of Christmas at the deepest level.

From the beginning, the message of the Savior of the world was for all nations. As the angels sang in the Gospel [Luke 2:1-14], “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” St. Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, continues this promise as he wrote to Titus, “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people...”

But to what purpose? Why did God in His grace send His only begotten Son? He so we could be “...training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age...” We do not by our own nature want to be slaves to anyone or anything, but left to our own devices we are in fact slaves to sin and our own sinful nature. But through the grace of God, where faith abides, we then become slaves to righteousness. This is all part of sanctification, the ongoing process of being made holy. We battle this sinner/saint dichotomy daily throughout our lives here in time.

St. Paul continues, with why this training is beneficial, “... waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people...” This evening is Christmas Eve, the end of the Advent season and beginning of the Christmas season which runs until the Epiphany on January 6th, 2021. In Advent, which means “coming”, we focus on the Lord’s return by looking at His first appearance in the flesh. For the faithful, those redeemed from lawlessness, this is the hope St. Paul is writing about, but there are two schools of those who wait for this event.

Think about this example, is there a difference in the behavior of a prisoner who has the hope of freedom and a reunion with family and one who has no such hope? Sure, there is. In the first case, the prisoner wants to complete their sentence without complications, so

they obey the rules of the prison authorities and works to improve their situation. If there is no hope of liberty, the prisoner will rebel and break all the rules, or will despair, doing nothing more than is absolutely required.

Or if a student can look forward to a break from their studies, it is easy to study and work toward good grades. If there is no hope of vacation, it is easy to lose interest or even give up on learning. Likewise, if there is the expectation of a bright future after graduation or is there going to be any change in the student's circumstances.

As redeemed believers, our hope is in the resurrection. Whether we die here in time or we live until Christ returns, we have the joy of knowing our fate. If the first option occurs, we know our soul goes to be with the Lord in heaven and we enjoy being only a saint in the presence of God and the heavenly hosts. On His return to earth, we also know we will be joined together body and soul as sheep to be led into the new heavens and new earth. Or, if the Lord returns, we will stand before the Judge who will declare us righteous and again lead us a sheep into eternal paradise in the new heavens and new earth.

Whatever our lot here in time is, we have a hope surpassing anything in this world; for we hope for an eternal vacation with Christ, so it is easier for us to fulfill our callings to show God's love to our neighbors. That is why St. Paul said to Titus, "...to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works." Our good works are strictly for the benefit of the recipient and do nothing to improve our standing before God or count towards our salvation. It is God who purifies us and God who owns us, we are slaves to His righteousness. In the greatest gift ever given, and by that gift we are saved, in Christ alone do we become a people sanctified and pure who are able to stand before the throne of God.

The gift of Incarnation is for all people of all time. This gift was given for everyone but unfortunately not everyone believes in the gift. However, for you that believe and trust in the promises given throughout scripture, this hope in the resurrection is your greatest gift, and not just for a couple weeks at the end of the year, or even for a season, but for all year long, year after year, forever. This is the best Christmas gift ever given and will carry you into the new heavens and new earth.