

Sermon for December 25th, 2024
THE NATIVITY

[Note for Deacons and Lay Leaders: I am of the opinion that worship services should not overshadow celebrations of festivities, for we worship God with enjoyment of His blessings: if people are anxious to celebrate, then over-extended liturgy can be counterintuitive to our goal. Whichever day you choose for this message and liturgy, I recommend having a *brief* full service or using the Order for Family Devotion, then and having a short period of devotion, singing, and praise on the other day.]

READINGS

Isaiah 9:2-7

- 2 The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone.
- 3 You have multiplied the nation;
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as they are glad when they divide the spoil.
- 4 For the yoke of his burden,
and the staff for his shoulder,
the rod of his oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.
- 5 For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult
and every garment rolled in blood
will be burned as fuel for the fire.
- 6 For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
- 7 Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Psalms 96

- 1 Oh sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth!
- 2 Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
- 3 Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples!
- 4 For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;

he is to be feared above all gods.
5 For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols,
but the LORD made the heavens.
6 Splendor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.
7 Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength!
8 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts!
9 Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness;
tremble before him, all the earth!
10 Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns!
Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity."
11 Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
12 let the field exult, and everything in it!
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
13 before the LORD, for he comes,
for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness,
and the peoples in his faithfulness.

Titus 2:11-14

11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, **12** training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, **13** waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, **14** who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

Luke 2:1-14

1 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. **2** This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. **3** And all went to be registered, each to his own town. **4** And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, **5** to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. **6** And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. **7** And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. **8** And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. **9** And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. **10** And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. **11** For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. **12** And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." **13** And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

Our text for meditation this Christmas Day is on our Epistle reading.

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Introduction

It is Christmas Day! And of course, as customary, my homily will be short so that we can all go right back to celebrations with our families and friends. But you may be wondering... what does our reading have to do with Christmas? St. Paul speaks of Christ bringing salvation to all people, so the offer of the Gospel rings out everywhere. This is fantastic news, but where is His Birthday in here? For that matter, you may be wondering to yourself, “why is this pastor bringing up a passage that talks about living godly lives and being zealous for good works? *Sheesh*, can we not do one of those commanding, Law-based sermons on Christmas Day?”

The Great News of Christ's Arrival

But I have good news for you my friends: this passage is anything *but* that sort of message. To the contrary, it is nothing but good news for us. Jesus Christ did not show up to make any demands except for you to trust in Him. He was born to save you, He lived to save you, He died to save you and rose again to save you. It requires absolutely no merit on your part to be saved. You do not have to “renounce ungodliness and worldly passions,” nor do you have to live a “self-controlled, upright, and godly” life or be “zealous for good works” in order to be saved. Salvation is the prerogative of our Lord Alone.

“But wait pastor,” you might object, “this passage speaks of all those things! The reading tells us we are supposed to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, live self-controlled lives, and be zealous for good works.” Ah, you are correct! But my friends, we must ask how these virtues are accomplished in us. Is it by our own efforts? Not in the slightest. Though we are exhorted in the Scriptures to cooperate with everything God is doing in our lives, and we have the freed will to do good things, and we are supposed to obey as best as we can, note here the language that St. Paul uses: it is all about what *Jesus* does, not what we do.

The Apostle makes it clear that our Lord saved us out of pure Grace. But that Grace does not have to be for just one purpose. Our Lord was born in Bethlehem for the sake of saving us from damnation and from sin and death and the devil; but here we see that He *also* saved us to make us *better*. Here, St. Paul says that Christ's arrival was in part to train us for these virtues. It is not required that you bring about your salvation by all these disciplines, but rather that you should *expect* our Lord to foster them within you!

The good news in this is not just found in how salvation is a free offer for us. Making it even better is that our holiness is made greater. Have you ever looked in the mirror and disliked how you looked? Have you ever done so looking *inwards*? Ashamed of your sin, frustrated with your lack of discipline, always feeling disappointed in yourself, I have been there too.¹ But Christ came so that we may be free from these burdens – and like our salvation, this is by *His* efforts, not our own.

Conclusion

Greater preachers than I have pointed out that part of being a Christian is Christ being “born” in us. When we are Baptized, we are born again as we are united to Christ. But to be *born* is to grow, just like Christ grew. Over time, we become more like Him, being more disciplined and less worldly, more zealous to do good works and less apt to sin. Christ is not literally “born” in us, but by this the preacher of old mean that He raises us to be like Him. Christmas is not just about Christ's Birthday: we include here that He grew for us, and grows us into His Image. Let us then continue our celebrations and enjoy our time with family, unburdened by any perfectionism or anxiety to be “doing enough” for the Kingdom of God. Opportunities for good deeds will present themselves, and our Lord will help us and

¹ Frankly, I *still* have these moments on occasion.

motivate us to make the right choices. We are His children, and He raises us right. So relax my friend, and have a Merry Christmas.

Now the Peace of our Lord, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.