

Grace Lutheran Community, Christmas Eve, 2017

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.
Titus 2:11

What Is It That We Hope For? How has the coming of Christ into this world changed our world... our lives... your life...

Tonight we celebrate the greatest gift given to humankind, and one of the grandest expressions of the gospel is contained in Titus 2:11, where Paul tells us, "The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people."

When Paul writes, "For the grace of God has appeared," he is referring to the embodiment of grace in the person of Jesus Christ, who was "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). It is not that God's grace is missing from the Old Testament. No one was saved in the Old Testament apart from God's grace. But as John 1:17 states the contrast, "For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ." God rightly could have sent His Son to condemn us and judge us. But instead (John 3:17), "For God did not send His Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him."

The good news of God's grace is that no sinner is beyond the reach of God's grace. The apostle Paul was a persecutor of the church. He called himself the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:13, 15). But he experienced God's grace through the cross. If the chief of sinners found mercy, so can you!

A basic Pauline notion is being articulated here in Titus -- the Incarnation has transformed everything. That includes not only the way one thinks (Romans 12:2) but also how one might actually relate to God and God's good creation, which of course includes one's neighbour. In other words, God's favour (charis) is experienced as a transforming power. As Titus 2:13 puts it (using the adjective soterios), God has manifested a "saving grace" in Christ.

God's pure grace gets polluted from two sides. On the one side, grace runs counter to the way the world works, so it's difficult for us to grasp it and get used to it. The world works on the merit system. If you do well in school, you get good grades and win awards. If you do well in sports, you make the team and get a lot of applause. If you get into university, the merit system continues to reward excellence. This carries over into the world. Exceptional performance earns promotions and raises. Sloppy performance will get you fired.

In the spiritual realm, all of the world's religions, except for biblical Christianity, work on the merit system. God's grace is not about what you do to 'earn salvation'.

But God's grace also gets distorted from another side, which mistakes the grace of God for a liberty to do whatever one likes and in a person's heart believes is 'good' (Jude 4). Many wrongly think that God's grace means that He gives out free passes that allow us to sin, with no consequences for disobedience. If you emphasise the need to obey God's commandments or do good works, they call you a legalist. If you warn them that their sloppy view of sin will result in God's discipline, they don't want to hear it. Their mantra is, "I'm not into your rules kind of religion. I'm under grace, not law."

Why should we as Christians live any differently than anyone else? What is the motivation?

What the Titus passage tells us is that God acted by giving us a gift in Jesus Christ, "bringing salvation to all," and that the appropriate response to such an act is "to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly" (2:11, 12). What the Titus passage tells us is that God has brought His love into this world in an incredible way through the birth of Jesus – the Incarnation...

You may have heard the story (true story) about a young couple that illustrates the reconciling work of Jesus Christ. This couple was very young when they married; she was nineteen and he was only twenty years of age. Six years and three children later, they were no longer doe-eyed in love. The wife decided she couldn't take any more dirty dishes or dirty nappies so one day she simply walked away. Every now and then she called to check on the children but she refused to come home even when her husband begged her to return. Then after many days of separation, the husband hired a private detective to look for his wife. Through hard work and careful investigation, the detective finally traced her to a rundown hotel. Upon hearing this, the husband packed a bag, put his children with a neighbour, and took a bus to meet her. You can imagine how he felt when he knocked on her door, she opened it, and he came face to face with his lost but much loved wife. For a brief moment, he looked at her and she looked at him, and then she fell apart in his arms. This time, when he asked her to come home, she tearfully agreed. Later, he asked her, "Why wouldn't you tell me where you were when you called to check on the children? You knew I loved you. Why wouldn't you come home?" Through her tears she replied, "Before (you came), your love was just words. But now I know how much you love me because you came (to get me)."

"Now I know how much you love me because you came to get me!" This is how God came to get us in Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the gift all the world was waiting for. When Adam and Eve first fell into sin, God promised that one of Eve's offspring would crush Satan's head. (Gn. 3:15) When God called Abram to become father of the Jewish nation, God promised that one of his offspring would bring blessing to the world. (Gn. 22:18) Looking down the long tunnel of time, the prophets foresaw the coming

of this promised offspring. Perhaps Isaiah saw his coming best; for Isaiah said, "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." (Is. 9:6)

Jesus came into the world not at the top, but at the bottom. And while you may justly see the glory of God in the immensity of creation and the grand things of human artistry, we do better to look in the forgotten corners of the earth and of human community. For God has always been in the redemption business: bringing light from darkness, calling unlikely people to remarkable things, hearing the prayer of slaves and foreigners, leading captives homeward, and bringing hope and salvation into our lives.

What Is It That We Hope For?

One of the grandest expressions of the gospel is contained in Titus 2:11, where Paul tells us, "The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people." Our Lord Jesus Christ is the baby who changed everything, even our lives. What a wonderful gift we celebrate this night. May you also rejoice in God's grace and love for you, now and always. Amen.