

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.¹² It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age,¹³ while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ,¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. (Titus 2:11-14)

The Grace of God Has Appeared!

“It came out of nowhere!” Has that ever happened to you? You were driving on the highway and you went to change lanes and all of sudden, someone’s jamming on their horn or a car is roaring passed you at a hundred miles an hour. You looked, but you never saw them. “They just appeared!” You couldn’t see them and now you can. That’s what we usually think of when something or someone *appears*. Christmas is kind of like that. Not the holiday we celebrate every year. That Christmas shows up already before Thanksgiving. One of the radio stations I have programmed on my car changed over to Christmas music already the first week of November. Christmas shows up in the stores no later than Black Friday, and the truth is the preps are going on long before that. Christmas in America doesn’t sneak up on anybody – and that’s true even if you aren’t quite ready for it yet.

I was talking about the first Christmas, the reason we have this holiday. That night did sneak up on the whole world, even though God had spent thousands of years prepping the world to see it, as we just heard in our series of lessons and carols. On the first Christmas Eve, during those hours before the child was born, almost no one was expecting the Christ to come right then and there. He just appeared, and then shepherds were seeing angels and racing off to Bethlehem. God’s plan went into action and it slowly gathered speed and momentum until the Son of God who was sleeping in a manger went to the cross and the empty tomb and beyond. All of it seemed to come out of nowhere, because it came from the mind and heart of God. My friends, **the grace of God has appeared!**

I.

It brings salvation to all people. To understand the point St. Paul is making for us tonight, you have to understand what grace means. My wife and I had dinner with some people recently and on the way home, I said, “They were very gracious people.” My wife paraphrased that by saying that they made us feel very welcome. That’s a wonderful thing, but it’s not what the Bible means by grace. Professional dancers and athletes often have a certain grace in the way that they move. Again, that’s a beautiful thing. But it’s not saving grace either. The word that Paul uses here really means a gift. It’s something that someone chooses to give simply because they love someone. Often in the Lutheran Church, we say that grace is an undeserved gift of God or more simply, we say that grace is God’s undeserved love. That love has appeared. It came out of nowhere. God gave us a gift that no one saw coming. What was the gift? The child of Bethlehem.

Last week I had chapel with the preschoolers and I asked them, “What was the very first Christmas gift?” The four-year-olds got it right. One of them shouted out, “Jesus!” Paul says, **“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.”** In Jesus, God provides a rescue for all people everywhere. So God was thinking of you when he sent his Son to live for nine months in the womb of the Virgin Mary and to be born in a stable. God wanted every human being on earth to know his love. God wanted all of us to share in the gift of Christ. And God wanted all people to see that, so the angel sent the shepherds not to a hospital or a clinic or even to a private home where a midwife was working. God sent them to the only stable in Bethlehem where a baby was born that night. Then God sent that message out through them, though the apostles, through the Scriptures and the Church into all the world – and to right here tonight.

Now, when you read the verses Paul wrote here, you can’t help but notice that he’s talking about living a Christian life. Paul says that the grace of God that appeared **“teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.”** How does that statement make you feel? Do you say “no” to ungodliness and worldly passions? This is the holiday season and I hope that over the next few days, you experience some holiday cheer. But is there any chance that you’ll go a little too far? Will you be embarrassed to think about what you did and said? Do you live a self-controlled

and upright life? I think we all feel a little guilty when we take a close look at ourselves. That shows that we need the rescue that God sent us.

The story of the baby who was laid in the manger at Bethlehem is more than just a cute story or a traditional story or a story designed to make us feel good. It's the story of how God gave us the thing we needed most: a Savior. Jesus was born in Bethlehem so that he could grow up to give us salvation. It is a gift. Our salvation is not something that we work for or pay for. Our offerings here at church don't buy salvation for us. Our godly lives don't earn salvation for us. God gives it. A little later in this reading, Paul says that Christ gave himself to redeem us. God is saying that all sin is really a crime against him. The punishment for all sin is the same: death and hell. So every one of us has to admit that we have sinned and every one of us has to admit that we deserve to die and spend eternity in hell. But God loves us and he wants us to live with him forever. So he sent his Son to die and suffer hell in our place – to buy us back, if you will.

That's really what "redeem" means. If you have a certificate of deposit at your bank and you redeem it, the bank buys it back from you. They give you the money and you give them the certificate. That baby that was born in Bethlehem came here to buy us back from death and hell. What did it cost him? A life of poverty and temptation and opposition – a life he lived perfectly in our place. It cost him blood and pain endured on the cross. It cost him his life and even hell itself. All that Jesus paid so that we will be free from hell and even from death. All that was included when God gave us that baby in Bethlehem. Rescue from our own sin is the first and best gift of Christmas.

II.

When we get gifts, especially precious gifts, it changes us. When I gave my wife her wedding ring, it changed her life, and her gift of my ring changed mine. When God gives us children, our lives will never be the same, and that's true even if we already have children. Some gifts are just so precious that they become turning points in our lives. Grace means God's most precious gift, Jesus. **God's grace has appeared! It teaches us to have hope.**

We hope for a new and better life even here on this earth. The grace of God teaches us to say "no" to ungodliness and worldly passion. It teaches us to practice self-control, to be godly and upright in this age, not just in heaven. That's part of the gift God gave us. How does that work? The good news about Jesus is the very power of God. It reaches into our hearts and it makes us different. In that respect it's much greater than those other gifts I mentioned. Those have a natural power to them. Holding your newborn son or daughter touches your heart and makes your life different in a way that you couldn't imagine before you held him or her. But that happens to people all over the world every single day. It happens to believers and unbelievers alike, because it's something God built into the human heart. When you receive the gift of Jesus, something supernatural happens, something that could never happen without God reaching in and doing a miracle.

God takes a heart that hates him and makes it a heart that loves him and trusts him and looks forward to spending eternity with him. And God makes that heart want to serve the Lord. That's a gift! Now, that doesn't mean it's easy. We have to strive to live that life. God has to teach us over and over again to be new and different. But the newness and the difference are part of the Christmas present he gave us in Bethlehem. Even though we may not feel like we're all that disciplined and upright, even though we may be haunted by memories of shameful, hurtful things we've done, still we can have hope that tomorrow we will live that upright life, because the power of God is still working in that message to change us.

We hope for the day when we will finally be free from all the weakness and all hardship of this world. Jesus came down from heaven and embraced our weakness and hardship. In the manger of Bethlehem, he lay down in the depths of human squalor and poverty and emptiness. He slept his first night outside the womb in a feeding trough! But after a life of humiliation and poverty and suffering, Jesus has now led the way to glory. He lives now in heaven. And when God gave us Christ, he gave us the promise that we will rise from ashes to glory. When Jesus comes back, he will wipe away all suffering and hurt. He will make our hearts new again, and we won't even feel the hurts that have tormented us for all our lives here. We won't feel guilt or shame or temptation. And we'll never sin again. He will make the world new like it was in the Garden of Eden and we will live with him forever.

When will that day come? That's a surprise. It's a gift that's in the mail but we don't actually know when the heavenly UPS is going to show up. St. Paul says, **"We wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ."** Once again, he's going to come out of nowhere. For

most people, his appearing is going to be a complete and total surprise, even though he's warned us for centuries that it was going to happen. But for you and me, the joy of Christmas includes the joy of knowing that the grace of God appeared once and he will most certainly appear again. And then we will have the greatest homecoming since the creation of the world. We will live with Jesus. The grace of God has appeared. He gives salvation to all people. He gives it to you. Enjoy the first and greatest of all Christmas gifts. Amen.