

*Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the way for your only Son. Amen.*

So, yesterday, did you wake up bright and early? Did you tear downstairs into the living room as fast as you could? What did you get? Was it everything you'd been hoping for? And yes, I know that yesterday was not Christmas. But yesterday, December 6, was Saint Nicholas Day.

You know, jolly old Saint Nicholas, who lived sixteen hundred years ago in the fourth century and was the bishop of Myra, a city in Turkey. He was known for his generosity, for putting coins in children's shoes in the middle of the night. And now, over a thousand years later, kids all over the world wake up on December 6 hoping to find an early Christmas present in their shoes or in their stockings.

Maybe you observe Saint Nicholas Day, maybe you don't. Either way, when it comes to presents, December 25 is still the main event. And for good reason. We open presents on December 25 to honor the present that God gave to us: his own Son, the greatest Christmas gift ever.

But at the time nobody knew. In fact, for thirty years that first Christmas gift was tucked away under the tree. It wasn't until Jesus was a grown man that God's gift to the world was fully unwrapped, when Jesus began to preach and teach and work miracles.

But before that gift was unwrapped, God gave his people another present, a present to help get them ready for that greatest Gift of all, **an early Christmas present**. Although it was kind of odd.

There he was out in the desert, covered in camel's hair. Eating locusts. Splashing water on people and telling them to repent. No wonder many flocked to see him (Matthew 3:5). No wonder many thought he was demon possessed (Luke 7:33).

But his purpose was obvious (Matthew 3:3). John the Baptizer was preparing people to meet Jesus (Luke 1:76-77). His goal was to put you where Psalm 130 wants you to be. In the depths.

**Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD; 2 O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy (130:1-2).** The Psalmist is drowning in the depths of despair. Ever been there? The days and weeks and months where things don't go well. The days of pain and suffering. The days of anguish, of uncertainty, of hospital, and clinic, and emergency, and tragedy, and death.

But Psalm 130 is about more than the depths of trouble, it's about the depths of sin – the sin that causes all your troubles (Genesis 3:16-19); the sin that separates you from God (Isaiah 59:2). Because the LORD takes sin personally (Psalm 51:4). So personally that there are more than depths of woe, there are the depths of hell (Luke 8:31). Because of sin. Because of your sin.

**If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? (130:3).** That is a dreadful statement, because it is not hypothetical. It is real. It is true. God is everywhere and he knows everything and he never forgets (Amos 8:7). He does keep record of sin (Daniel 7:10), and you will stand before him (2 Corinthians 5:10), and it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31). Because in all your years – be they many or few – you racked up quite a record.

And before such a God, who can stand? No one (Psalm 143:2). Because this God says, "Be holy" (Leviticus 19:2). Well, I can't be (Romans 8:7-8). And most days I don't even want to be holy the way God wants me to be, because that's not what my sinful flesh wants (Galatians 5:17).

So, why cry out to this Lord? What reason does he have to listen to you? You have no way to pay back your debt of sin (Psalm 49:7-8). There is no sacrifice you can offer, work you can do, gift you can give, prayer you can pray that will square things with God.

These are the depths that you create for yourself; the place God pulls you down to (2 Corinthians 7:10); the place where the Psalmist wants you to be, where John the Baptizer wants you to be (Matthew 3:10). Because unless you are in depths of woe, you will never understand what God does next.

**If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? 4 But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared (130:3-4).** Forgiveness! The kind that only God can give, the kind of forgiveness that shows mercy to sinners and appeases his anger over sin (Romans 3:25-26).

Not by bulls or goats or cold hard cash, or anything else you could imagine (1 Peter 1:18-19). Something bigger, something grander, something greater, something bloodier, something that causes us to fear him. Something mysterious.

You see, there are things about God that are by nature a mystery (1 Corinthians 4:1). You would never discover them on your own. But God wants you to know these secrets, because your salvation depends on them (Ephesians 3:2-6). And so, he entrusts these secrets to messengers like John the Baptizer or the author of Psalm 130. It's their job to make sure that the secrets don't stay secret.

One of those secrets will take center stage in eighteen days: the secret identity of the baby born in Bethlehem, a secret that has often been disputed. In fact, in the early 300s, a man named Arius was teaching that Jesus was created by God the Father and therefore Jesus himself was not God.

So a bunch of leaders in the early church got together in 325 in a city called Nicaea. Guess who was there? Jolly old Saint Nicholas. Only it turns out that Saint Nicholas wasn't so jolly. During the debate, Nicholas became so furious with Arius that he walked across the room and struck him in the face.

How come? Because **with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared (130:4)**. Nicholas understood that the secret that the Psalmist makes known, the secret of God's forgiveness, is bound up with the secret of Christ's identity. If Jesus is not God there can be no forgiveness with God. But if Jesus is "God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father" then there is forgiveness.

Why? Because God does keep a record of sin (Hebrews 4:13). The Lord does not ignore my sin. He does not forget your sin. But he also sees you in the depths. He knows just how far below the waters you are. That you have nothing. That you are without hope.

So God reaches down to pull you up. "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them" (2 Corinthians 5:19). In Christ, God became a man (Colossians 2:9), and he marked down all your iniquities. He marked them down against Christ (Isaiah 53:5). On the man-who-is-God he placed all your sins: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

So now there is no record of your sin; the God-man took it away (Colossians 2:13-14) and made everything the psalmist said true. Put your hope in that. **I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. <sup>6</sup> My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning (130:5-6).**

This Word in which we hope is not just so many words on a page, it is the Word who became flesh and made his dwelling among us (John 1:14). Jesus is the answer to the problem that puts us all in the depths, because Jesus is Immanuel, God with us (Matthew 1:23), the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29).

He is the God who hears and listens, the God who announced forgiveness to lepers and paralytics, to prostitutes and thieves, and even to the men crucifying him (Luke 23:34). For those wait for the LORD, the night of trouble is always chased away by the light of God's salvation.

This is the secret that you would never discover on your own, the secret you would forget if left on your own. So thank God that he gives you this **early Christmas present**, messengers who show you the God of unfailing love, who showed that love by sinking to the depths weighed down by your sin (Matthew 27:46). He is the God of full redemption, the God who does it all himself.

**O Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. <sup>8</sup> He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins (130:7-8).** Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.