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St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington
24 December 2023

Sermon on Titus 3:4-7

Worship Theme:

GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY – A SAVIOR HAS BEEN BORN!

Think of what the angel's statement means. If you believe you are basically a decent person (not perfect of course, but close enough!) then you will NOT have great joy this Christmas. One cannot truly celebrate Christmas unless one believes he needs salvation. So let us then use this night to acknowledge that none of us are good enough in God's eyes. Sin lives in our hearts and permeates our lives. We need to be saved – from the guilt of our sin, from the power of the devil, and from eternal death. So Jesus came to do exactly what we needed – to save us. His love for us was so great that he left his throne in heaven, crawled into a manger, and never stopped until he completed his mission on the cross. Oh, come let us adore him!

Sermon Theme: "When"

Grace, and mercy, and peace – all these have been freely given to you by God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. AMEN!

Did you wonder if Christmas would come this year? I doubt it. Maybe you were super excited for Christmas and it felt like it was taking forever to come, but none of us doubted that it eventually would. There are still many "ifs" in our Christmases though. We wonder if it will be good weather or not. We wonder if the family will all be healthy enough to get together. We worry about if we'll have enough food to feed everyone and we worry if people will enjoy the gifts we got them (or if we'll enjoy the gifts they got us!). Maybe we worry and wonder about how much celebrating we'll actually be able to do this Christmas. Maybe mom's in the hospital, the bills are piling up, you receive a call from the doctor and your test results aren't good; you ran yourself so ragged over the last few weeks with all the things to do and places to go until now that we're finally here at the actual time of Christmas, you don't even want it anymore. Many things are uncertain right now, but no matter what "ifs" we may be facing, the arrival of Christmas still wasn't one of them – the calendar marches on and we knew this day would eventually come.

But it shouldn't. Christmas shouldn't come – in fact, Christmas should be an unknown day and an unknown word to us, because it shouldn't exist. We all gathered here this evening to celebrate an event so unthinkable that nothing about it makes sense. The reasons why really aren't all that profound – Christmas shouldn't exist because of who we are and because of who God is. The Apostle Paul explores these two thoughts in his letter to his son-in-the-faith Titus. It's not an overly long letter, but it contains incredibly powerful words, especially in ch. 3. Paul lays out very clearly why Christmas shouldn't exist with the verse right before our reading tonight: *At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.* [Titus 3:3]

Did you notice? There's no "if" in that sentence – it's all a **when**. WE *were foolish, disobedient, deceived, and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.* That's probably not the message you expected to hear tonight, but that's exactly the point. We don't deserve Good News of Great Joy – no one does! We deserve THIS instead – a reminder of our true nature as sinful and disobedient against God Almighty. No "ifs" about it – look in the mirror! We know it's true.

And it doesn't stop there either. Scripture is consistent and clear that God is holy and cannot tolerate sin. Holiness and sin cannot co-exist and since God is holy he therefore must be sinless. And God demands that we be the same, for that is how he made us. He created everything that exists and he made it 100% perfect. When God finished creating, there was no pain or suffering, no sickness or disease, no loss or hardship, no death. There was no sin – just a perfect and holy God admiring his perfect and holy world.

But when Adam and Eve listened to the devil instead of God, they changed the fate of humanity. Now instead of a human race in complete harmony with God, Isaiah the Prophet explains our status this way: *Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.* ³ *For your hands are stained with blood, your fingers with guilt.* [Is. 59:2-3a] God is holy – no "ifs" about it! God is eternal and God is holy, therefore God is eternally holy, and ETERNITY is an endless "**when**" – nothing uncertain about it.

That's the message we deserve to hear. Whenever we confess that we have sinned against God in our thoughts, words, and actions and we deserve nothing but his eternal wrath and punishment, those aren't just words we're filling time with – they're undeniable truth. When we honestly look at ourselves through the lens of God's Word, we can't hide it – our sinfulness is there on display for all the world to see. So since we are disobedient sinners and since God is perfect and holy, there should not be a day called "Christmas." There should be no celebrating today, or any day. Today should be just another day filled with satisfying our own sinful pleasures as much as we can before our time is up and we're six feet under.

If we don't have a Savior, that's the only reality we get. If left to our own efforts to change our fate, we're certain to fail. In Titus 3, Paul refers to "*righteous things we have done*" – but there are none. If it is up to us to placate an angry God or to somehow earn our way into heaven by what we do, then heaven is going to be a very empty place. No "ifs" about it – we can't do it.

But God didn't send angels 2,000 years ago to announce a day filled with "ifs"; at Christmas, God gives us a "**WHEN**." Titus 3 – *when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared.* Christmas is not just a "warm and fuzzy gather around the fireplace" kind of day – it's SO much more!! Christmas is the day God took all our uncertainty and made it certain. Christmas is the day that never should have happened, but did. Christmas is the day *the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared.*

Look into the manger. There he is. Not an cute little "precious moments" baby; no, there lies GOD. All the perfection and holiness of God himself, wrapped

up in frail human flesh just like ours. The demands God makes in his law are clear – if people wish to be saved, nothing less than perfection will do. So God became human to be the perfection we need. For the past four weeks, our Advent theme has been “The King Shall Come.” Today we celebrate that he has – no “ifs” about it! Jesus has come!

When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, NOT because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. This doesn't change or negate the rest of Scripture – God is still and always will be holy and therefore God will never tolerate sin. But for that very reason, instead of punishing us as we rightly deserve, God in his mercy took our sins away and saved us. That's the whole reason he came. All our righteous acts were like filthy rags – they amounted to nothing in our favor. But the righteous acts of the Righteous One are more than sufficient, and he credits every one of them to our accounts, presenting us to God the Father as equally holy and blameless, worthy of eternal life. Isaiah says, again in ch. 59, “*Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save.*” No “ifs” or uncertainty about it – *He saved us because of his mercy.*

Now we have a different **when** in our lives. Instead of being nothing but sinners, trapped in sin and unable to save ourselves from it, now we *have been justified by his grace*, so that *we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life*. Justified is a fancy word used in the Bible to explain the change in status we have received from God's courtroom. The Just Judge considers all the evidence, slams the gavel down, and declares that we are “NOT GUILTY.” We're not guilty of any sin in God's eyes, because Jesus came to take it all away. And he succeeded – thousands of years ago already. No “ifs” about it! And because he did, we go through every day of our lives filled with the most incredible hope – God is with us every day of our lives on earth and he has prepared a place in his heaven for us to dwell with him forever.

God gives all these blessings personally to us through faith in Jesus, which he gives as yet another gift of his mercy. Through Holy Scripture and Holy Baptism, the Holy Spirit connects us by faith to Jesus the Savior. *He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us generously.* We're washed, we're clean, we're holy and pure, all by the mercy and grace of God. Not a bit of uncertainty about it! **When** God did this, these blessings were all freely given to us.

There may still be a lot of “ifs” in your Christmas this year – almost everything involving people and life does have some sort of uncertainty in it, because so little is guaranteed. But that's okay; no matter what our “ifs” are, there is absolutely nothing uncertain about God's part of Christmas: *When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.* Today and tomorrow we celebrate a day that shouldn't be real, but is. Because of *the kindness and love and*

mercy of our God, the waiting is over – Jesus is here and we have a Savior! Our Savior is not an “if!” He’s a **when** that happened in time and history and we can point to it as the moment our story changed forever. God’s kindness and love are a **when**. Jesus saved us is a **when**. We are justified and declared not guilty is a **when**. And **when** Jesus returns to bring his people to eternal life in heaven, our joy in the presence of God will be a **when** that never ever stops. Good News of Great Joy indeed! Glory to God in the highest! AMEN!

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.