

24 December 2006
Christmas Eve

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Kindness and Love of God our Saviour”

What a privilege and joy to hear once again this night the loving plan of salvation of our God. To sing of His goodness and love. And to remember His faithfulness. For as we live in an unloving and faithless world, these are words that we need to hear; indeed, every year.

To hear that in the beginning, when our parents turned against God and reached for something other than God, that God our Father did not reject them or destroy them, but promised them a Saviour. A Saviour who would come from their own seed, from their own bodies, that because a man became the cause of sin, a man would also be the remedy from sin. (1 Cor 15:22, 45)

Then we heard of God’s faithfulness to Abraham, that Abraham was not required to sacrifice his beloved son of the promise, Isaac. No, it would not be Father Abraham who would give his son, it would be our Heavenly Father who would give *His* Son for the life of the world. And in Him, the Son of God but also a son of Abraham, would all the nations of the earth be blessed.

Isaiah the prophet spoke to us next, a message of hope. For in his time the darkness of sin had reached near epic proportions. The people were walking in a very deep darkness of sinful selfishness and idolatry. And it was going to get darker. But if it is darkest before the dawn, it is the dawn that Isaiah here proclaims to us – that the light of hope was coming. The light that would restore joy in the forgiveness of sins. The light that would scatter the darkness of fear and death, and give peace and life. And who would do this? A child. A Son.

Isaiah then continued with a picture of Paradise restored, of peace. But this peace would come only after the great tree of Israel had been cut down to a seemingly dead and lifeless stump. Yet from this stump would come a resurrection. A rod, a branch, a shoot would appear, from the house of Jesse, David’s father – and so from the house and lineage of David. And His weapon would be His Word.

Then we heard the wonderful Gospel, the story with which we are so familiar. That at just the right time (Gal 4:4) God sent His Son into the world. The Son of God to be born a son of man. That as both God and man, He be uniquely qualified to reconcile man and

God. To make the two separated by sin, one again. And so it was told to Mary, and so it came to pass. No fairy tale, this story! No “once upon a time!” No, *it came to pass* – it happened – anchored in history; anchored in real life travel and taxes and birth. The Son of God made low, that we bent low in sin might be exalted.

Then the angels sang of this birth to – who else? – but *shepherds*. It is only appropriate that they be the first visitors to see the Lamb of God. . . . And the angels, who witnessed one of their own rebel against God and be thrown out of Heaven, who had to guard the entrance to Eden after man fell into sin, now get to sing for joy and proclaim the wonderful news of the birth of the Saviour!

But that’s not the end of the story. Too often we stop there at Christmas, and think that we have heard the story. But if we stop there, the Christmas story is *only* history; the nice, warm, peaceful story of Christmas cards and carols that happened a long time ago. But if that’s all Christmas is, then it is in reality a time of great sadness for us. For then it is not for you and me. And we are still stuck in sin and death, from which we cannot rescue ourselves or set ourselves free.

For like Adam and Eve, we too reach in sin for what is not God, but what *we* want, what our hearts and eyes desire, what is not good for us.

And unlike Abraham, we look for blessings in holding onto the things of this world, instead of letting them go and looking for good only in God.

Like the people in Isaiah’s time, we are living in the deep darkness of sin – of *increasing* selfishness and *decreasing* regard for life, of ambivalence toward God and His truth, popular opinion proclaiming all religions as equally valid paths to God.

And it is a time when it seems as if the Church is being chopped down and sacrificed upon the altars of relativism and liberalism and pragmatism, until it is only a stump.

But no! No, the story that we heard tonight is not just the story of *others* – it is *our* story; *our* plight. **And we need a Saviour.** To come to us laid low in sin. To come to us living in the shadow of death. To come to us who are lost and confused, and give us peace. True peace. Peace which lasts not only in this world and life, but even unto the next. Peace with God in sins forgiven.

And *that is* the story we heard tonight! The apostles John and Paul proclaiming to us as our own angels, that this Saviour is *our* Saviour! That He has come to live *for us*, to die *for us*, and to rise to life again *for us*. And that because He did, we too shall live. He took the sin of the world – your sin and my sin! – upon Himself, and became our

propitiation, the atoning sacrifice to heal the breach of sin between us and God. That in Him we be reconciled to God, be justified (or made right) by His grace, and be once again heirs of eternal life.

And when we are baptized into Him, that is all ours! We are lifted up, and renewed, and given life again. Life no longer captive to the wisdom and ways of this world, but life set free to live in Christ, in His love, and in His forgiveness; not only receiving these things for ourselves, but now also giving them to others.

And so tonight we remember. Tonight is the night when the promised kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared. In that little town named Bethlehem. To that virgin named Mary, of the house of David. Born in humility, come *all the way down* to us, to raise us all the way up to Him. ***For unto you is born this night . . . Christ the Lord!***

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.