

Jesu Juva

“Lighting the Darkness of Our Hearts”

Text: John 1:6-8, 18-28; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

We heard from St. Paul today these words: *Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely.* To sanctify means to make holy. And may the God of peace do it, says St. Paul, *because we cannot.* We poor sinners cannot be or make ourselves holy. Period.

Oh, you can do good deeds. All of you have, in fact. You've helped and cared for and gone out of your way for others. You are generous with those who need help, both friends and strangers alike. *But you are not thereby holy.* The good you *do* cannot make up for the sin you *have*. If so, a criminal in court could plead all the good things he has done as a defense for the crime he has committed. But he cannot, for he is guilty, and so are you.

That's why we prayed in the collect this morning: *Lord Jesus Christ, we implore You to hear our prayers and to lighten the darkness of our hearts by Your gracious visitation.*

The darkness of our hearts. We prayed not that Jesus would lighten the darkness of *the world*, though the world is pretty dark with sin. The news is filled with such darkness, and every time another new and heinous sin is reported, we're shocked . . . but not really surprised. That's our world. A sin-dark world.

This time of year seems to express that more than any other. Next Sunday, December 21, has the least amount of daylight of any day of the year. And so many Christmas lights adorn our neighborhoods and transform them into colorful and bright visions - but when they all go out soon after Christmas, the darkness seems even deeper, doesn't it?

But we didn't pray for Jesus to lighten the darkness of our world. He will do that when He comes again in the brightness of His glory, when He will finally put an end to all sin and sinfulness and darkness. That day is coming, and we've been praying our Advent prayer for it: *Come, Lord Jesus!* But until that day, *start with me.* And that we be ready for that day, *lighten the darkness of my heart.*

Cuz' our hearts are pretty dark too, aren't they? Isaiah described us as those who are poor, captive, bound . . . *and brokenhearted.* In English we usually use that word to mean sad, but in Hebrew it's those who hearts have been broken by sin, whose hearts have been smashed and shattered by sin, so they don't work right anymore. That's us. That's the darkness. And so we don't love as we should, nor do or speak or desire as we should. Raise your hand if you haven't made the darkness of this world even darker for someone

else because of what you said or did. And just slapping a Christmas card or present or light on it doesn't really fix the problem, does it? The problems are still there when the lights go out, the cards recycled, and the presents put away.

Truth is, it's a miracle that we're even here at all. That we haven't sinned ourselves into extinction.

It is a miracle indeed, for it is the work of our loving God. His work to love and care for and preserve us, that He may bring all to faith; that He make us all His children; that He lighten the darkness of all - one person, one heart at a time.

So to do that, to - again as Paul said - *sanctify us*, the Father not only sent His Son, first He sent John the Baptist. John, who basically had two jobs: (1) to point out our sin, and then (2) point us to the One who could save us from it. Who he was, who John was, wasn't important. That's why (as we heard) when some priests and Levites came to him to find out who he was, he wouldn't tell them - he only told them who he *wasn't*. That he wasn't the One. All he was was a **voice** and a **finger**. The voice of repentance, and the finger pointing to the One. Pointing to and confessing Jesus as the One, the Christ, the promised prophet greater than Moses.

Now there are lots of voices and fingers in our world today. Most of the voices aren't worth listening to, and most of the fingers aren't pointing to Jesus, but communicating quite a different message to us! And so lots of people will celebrate Christmas and the baby Jesus, and yet sadly have no idea why. And so John has come to climb into the witness stand and tell us. *To speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help him God*, for he was sent from God to do so. To witness to the truth about us, and to the truth about our Saviour . . . and how these two truths *converge in the One laid in the manger*. That Jesus is the Son of God become a son of man. That the baby in the manger is *the God of peace* [come] *to sanctify you*.

That's why (to quote a popular Christmas hymn) that *Silent Night* was a *Holy Night* - because the Holy One had come to make us holy. Born of a virgin and so born without sin, the Holy One is thus born holy. But to become unholy - not through His own sin, but by taking upon Himself ours. By making our sin His, our darkness His, burdening Himself with a burden no ordinary man could bear, and receiving the judgment in our place. And so the innocent one is given our sin, declared guilty, and sentenced to death on a cross.

When He was born, He was given the name Jesus; when He was crucified, the title placed over His head was "King of the Jews;" but the blood poured out upon the ground that day was the blood not just of a man or a king, **but the blood of God**. The blood of God shed *to sanctify you completely - your whole spirit and soul and body*. Which means to do the

job not only part of the way, for part of you; but all of the way, for all of you. No part of you unaffected or untouched. To forgive all of you, that you be holy as He is holy.

The problem is, we don't feel holy. We still sin. We still struggle with temptation. And we still fall. We see and feel these things and so think the work of God is *not* complete - and so there must be something wrong with me, or something I have to do, or . . . or it's just not true.

And so it is important to know that the holiness we are given is not of nature - *not yet*. As I said, that will come with *the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ*, on the Last Day, with the resurrection, when our flesh is finally raised new and we are rid of the sinfulness that has adhered itself to us through and through. The sin that drags us down. The sin that seems to keep sprouting like weeds in our hearts and lives.

But though we are not yet holy by nature, **we are holy** - for just as our sin was given to Jesus and He was declared guilty, so His holiness is given to us and we are declared not guilty; holy. Our sin no longer held against us, for it was held against Jesus in our place. And so you really have been forgiven and set free. Set free from the tyranny and dominion and condemnation of sin, to live as children of God like Paul described - ***“Rejoicing always, praying without ceasing, [and] giving thanks in all circumstances.”*** Doing good, speaking good, desiring good, and more and more.

And so this kind of holiness is a matter of faith. Not in the sense that I'm holy because I believe I'm holy. That would be like me being a dog because I believe I'm a dog! No, we are holy not because we believe in ourselves, but because we believe the Word and promise of the One, the One who came to save us, and so by faith receive what He has promised: His forgiveness. For as St. Paul told us, ***“He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.”*** And so even if I don't feel holy, I believe not what I think or feel (that's what the evil one wants us to do); I believe instead what my Saviour has told me. That I am forgiven and therefore holy; that I *have been* given His Spirit; and that by His Word and Spirit, Jesus is now causing *holiness* to sprout and grow in our hearts and lives.

And so although you may look and feel the same when you leave church as when you came, you *never* leave this church the same. How could you? *How could you* be the same after your Saviour has told you “I forgive you all your sins”? *How could you*, after the body and blood of Jesus, the body and blood of God, has been placed into your mouths and poured over your lips? *How could you* after the living and active Word has flooded your ears and hearts? **You are not the same.** For you have been “holied” - sanctified - by the Holy One Himself. The Holy One who laid in a manger, who hung on a cross, and now comes by His Spirit to live and work in you.

To do this work is why the Son of God came and was born as the baby Jesus on that Silent Night, as we will soon remember. But when He comes again in glory, that day will

be anything but silent, but filled with the rejoicing of *the angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven*. Rejoicing as the Bridegroom comes for His Bride, to take us home.

Until He does, your Saviour will keep you safe. Safe in His holiness and forgiveness. *He is faithful. He will do it.*

That is the message for us in Advent; this Advent now half over. The Nativity of our Lord is not far away now. And so we lit the rose candle on the Advent Wreath today, for it is the candle of joy. And soon, soon our joy will be complete. For He is coming. The Light is coming. *Come, Lord Jesus.*

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