

24 December 2002
Christmas Eve

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A Wondrous Rescue”

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

Bernard of Clairvaux, one of the great saints of the Medieval Church, in contemplating the Nativity of our Lord, wrote the following:

“As the first parents fell into sin, the Righteousness of God accused the human race before the throne of God and petitioned God that He would deal with fallen mankind in accordance with His strict righteousness. Thereupon the Truth of God also came and petitioned that God would fulfill His threats and not go against His Word. And even though the Mercy of God stepped in between and pleaded for mankind, the Righteousness of God still pressured hard for punishment until finally God’s Wisdom, that is, the Son, stepped before the throne of God and said: Let the Righteous pay for the unrighteous and the Innocent for the guilty. Thereupon the Mercy of God wandered about in heaven and upon earth but could find no such payer either among the angels or among men; and for that reason He came back again before God’s throne and said: The One who gave the counsel, He also wants to perform the deed for this.”

And tonight we heard again the wondrous story, as the Son of God, the Righteous One, the Innocent One, came to “perform the deed,” to pay the price for our sins. It is such a wondrous story, and yet told so simply, and so plainly. A man and a woman, a census, and a trip to Bethlehem. A stable, a birth, swaddling cloths, and a manger. So simple, and yet at the same time beyond our understanding. This newborn child is the creator of the world. This baby is the omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent Son of God. This infant wrapped in swaddling cloths is the One whose hand sustains creation. . . . And, He wants to be here. He was no reluctant Saviour, but One who came willingly – so great is His love for us. He willingly lowered Himself, willingly did not use His divine power, and would willingly allowed Himself to be mistreated and crucified, all so that we could live. So that we could live and not die in punishment for our sins. . . . And so the Righteous One now lies in a manger, come to pay the price for us who are unrighteous. The Innocent One now lives as a man on earth, to pay the price for us who are guilty. . . . And because He has, there is not sadness, but joy in Heaven! The angels who once had to bar and guard the entrance to Eden and the Tree of Life are now singing for joy in the heavens, **“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.”**

Because on this night, the Righteousness, Truth, Love, Mercy, and Wisdom of God are brought together in one man, the God-man, Jesus our Saviour, and in Him we once again have peace with God.

And apart from Him there is no peace, there is no life, there is no salvation. And unless we realize that, we will not understand Christmas. That's why its so distressing to hear so many people today emphasize the fact that since "God is Love" we therefore cannot judge what anyone believes; that therefore God accepts everyone as they are; that therefore it doesn't matter what religion one believes, for God is Love and surely, He understands such diversity. . . . Bernard of Clairvaux would have a difficult time understanding such a God! For while yes, God is Love, He is also Righteousness, and Justice, and Truth. And His Righteousness cannot be violated, and His Justice must be carried out, and His Truth stands forever. God cannot violate some of His attributes in favor of others – they are all true of Him, and He does not change.

So what to do about sin? God's Love indeed wants to forgive all and wants all to have eternal life. But as we heard in Bernard contemplation, God's Righteousness and Justice must be satisfied as well, and God's Word must stand – otherwise, how could we believe *anything* God has told us? . . . There is only one answer to this quandary, and tonight He is born. A Saviour who is both God and man – true man, in order to take our place and die our death; and true God, in order that His sacrifice would be worthy to pay the price for all people who ever lived. . . . For our sin is great. The sin that we have inherited, and so infects us from the moment of our conception; the sin that we commit daily. It is no small obstacle, requiring no small solution. And so the Son of God Himself comes. And the righteous demands of God will be fulfilled by Him. The justice of God will be meted out on Him. And the forgiveness of God will be earned and given by Him. . . . And He wants to perform this deed for us, so great is His love.

And so tonight we remember that God kept His promise to Adam and Eve to send One who would bruise the serpent's head. We remember that He kept His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to send a Saviour from their lineage. We remember that God fulfilled the prophecies of Isaiah to send One who would shatter the shroud of darkness and death that lay over us; who would establish and rule His everlasting Kingdom; who would pull His people up out of the ashes of death and into resurrection and new life; who would give us peace, true peace, once again. . . . Tonight, we remember that God fulfilled His promises in this child, born of a virgin, now lying in a manger. And that there was, and still is, no other way.

As I was thinking about all of this for this sermon tonight, I thought about the miners who were in the news this past summer – who were trapped in the mine because they had breached a wall and a torrent of water flooded the mine. They tried to escape, but they

couldn't. They tried to build a wall to keep the water out, but they couldn't. They tried to rely on each other and work with each other and tried everything they could think of, but nothing worked. They could not save themselves. And so they bound themselves together, and sat in the heavy darkness. Occasionally they would use their headlamps, but they knew their time was running out. Mostly it was dark, and wet, and cold, and the fear and reality of death grew greater and closer by the hour. . . . And I thought that's a pretty good picture of us, of our situation. Adam and Eve breached the wall that God had established and set loose the torrent of sin from which we cannot escape. We can't ignore it, and we can't build a wall to keep it out. We can try working together, as so many are doing these days, but despite doing all that we can think of, nothing will work to get us out. Isaiah talked about "*the people who walked in darkness*" – that's us. Walking and living in the heavy darkness of our sins, in a sin-filled world, knowing that our time is running out . . . The only hope is rescue. There is nothing we can do. The One with life must come down and save us.

And tonight, we remember that He did.

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