

“Why God Thought of Christmas”

TITUS 2:11-14, CHRISTMAS EVE, 2015

There certainly has been a lot of rainfall in the Midlands of South Carolina again this past week! And meteorologists tell us that the abundance of this rainfall may be attributed, in large part, to a rather fierce weather pattern that presents itself to us in the United States every 2 to 5 years. This climatic change develops out west of our nation, when winds are blowing over warm currents in the Pacific Ocean. These winds pick up extremely large amounts of water and then dump them all throughout our nation when they come inland. Strangely enough meteorologists have designated these weather patterns with the two Spanish words: “El Nino,” which means most literally in English: “The Little Boy.”

For the life of me I could never understand how these weather patterns got that most unusual name, until I read recently that they usually develop in the month of December, when we Christians are gathered together everywhere to celebrate the birth of our Savior; the birth of the Christ Child, whom Spanish speaking people have named for centuries as “El Nino.”

Well having said this, one of the hardest hit areas in our nation is without a doubt Southern California, where the heavy rainfall brings some pretty nasty mudslides. This past week I read the true story of a horrendous tragedy that took place for one family there in the middle of these mudslides in 1997 when their whole house was swept off of its foundation. This, in itself, was not all that unusual, but what was especially tragic is that this family’s little boy, their El Nino, was swept out of the house along with the mud!

The frantic parents of this little boy began to search through the darkness diligently for their child; tromping through the muck and the mire that had descended upon their whole neighborhood! They searched! They dug! They called out loud repeatedly for their “El Nino,” for their little boy—TIRELESSLY—ALL THROUGHOUT THAT LONG, UNFORGETTABLE NIGHT—but sadly enough they searched without results!

JUST WHEN THIS GRIEVING MOTHER AND HEART-STRICKEN FATHER OF THEIR “EL NINO” HAD GIVEN UP ALL HOPE OF HIS EVER BEING FOUND ALIVE EVER AGAIN, AND JUST AS THE SUNLIGHT WAS BURSTING OVER THE HORIZON, THIS IS THE VERY MOMENT WHEN THEIR LITTLE BOY’S RESCUER APPROACHED THEM ON THE FOLLOWING MORNING, WITH HIS OWN BODY COMPLETELY COVERED IN MUD!

HE CAME TO THESE TOTALLY DISTRAUGHT AND BEWILDERED PARENTS WITH THEIR MUD-CAKED BUNDLE OF JOY IN HIS ARMS! YES, THEIR LITTLE BOY, THEIR EL NINO, WAS FILTHY, BUT HE WAS VERY MUCH ALIVE! -- And certainly you can guess what happened next, can’t you? This is when the father and the mother of this little child wrapped their arms around their son and each other despite their “El Nino’s” dirt and grime. Sometime later they did wash all of the mud off of their beloved child, but not without embracing him most gratefully first! And then they vowed to do everything in their power to keep up out of such muddy conditions ever again!

Brothers and sisters I wanted to share this story with you tonight because I believe it helps to throw some great light for us upon these words of St. Paul to Titus in our epistle lesson this night.

Just when the whole human race seemed to be lost and adrift from our Heavenly Father forever; just when we were all completely covered in the mud and the muck and mire of our sin, death, and the power of the evil one, this is precisely when our gracious GOD SENT HIS ONLY-BEGOTTEN SON JESUS CHRIST into our world as one of us—to save us, not only by embracing us when we ourselves were still completely covered in the muck and the mire of our sins, but by allowing himself also to become completely covered in the muck and the mire of our sin also --- to redeem us and to present us to his heavenly father once again as his washed and redeemed children; children of the heavenly father whose lives have been radically changed by him forever!

Brothers and sisters, just listen again, if you will to these wonderful words of our epistle lesson tonight: “For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearance of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ; who gave himself for us, that he

might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works” (Titus 2:11-14)!

My friends there are very few passages in all the new testament that speak so clearly to us about the power of the gospel, not only to bring us the forgiveness of our sins and eternal life; but also about the power of the gospel to empower us to live “radically changed lives” in the present day. -- Here St. Paul says to us that the same grace of god that brought Jesus Christ into our world in the first place is the same grace of god that can fill us with a whole new set of desires while we are here. First of all there is the self-renunciation of all ungodliness and worldly desires! To renounce ungodliness is to live with a renewed commitment to First Commandment every day, as we live in the power of our Baptism: “You shall have no other gods before me!”

When St. Paul talks about the power of the gospel to help us renounce all worldly lusts, he’s not simply talking to us about the power that the Holy Spirit gives to us human beings to keep our sexual appetites under control, but also about the power of the Holy Spirit to prevent us from allowing our GREATEST AMBITION in this life to simply become, becoming “Filthy Rich.”

John Chrysostom was the Archbishop of Constantinople, an early Church father, who lived in the 4th Century BC. He said that the kind of “worldly lusts” or desires that Paul is speaking about to Titus here— involves all those things that we won’t be able to take to heaven with us when we die and are instead all those things that will be dissolved in fire on the Great and Last Day!

But like Martin Luther in his explanations to each of the Ten Commandments, Paul reminds us that the Gospel not only empowers us to abstain from those things which God tells us would only be harmful to us, but to actually embrace an approach to life that will totally enhance our existence and the quality of our lives while we are here: “Teaching us to live soberly, righteously, and godly lives in this present world” (v. 12).

And yet the most powerful motivation always for us human beings to strive to live morally in this world, while being committed to the highest degree possible of all ethical standards, has always been the deep-seeded belief that the Christ who came among us to die on the cross for our sins, and was raised up gloriously from the dead three days later on that first Easter morning, will come again in great glory, with power and honor, and the angels of heaven with him to one day judge all the living and the dead!

You know what I hear Paul saying to Titus here is the same thing that I hear Paul saying to the Corinthians in 2 Cor. 5:17, *“If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation, the old has passed away, behold the new has come! All this is from God who reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation!”*

What I hear Paul saying to Titus here is the same thing that I hear him writing to the Colossians in chapter 3:1-4: *“If then, you have been raised with Christ, seek those things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God! Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God! When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory!”*

We forget, so often, that great truth of which the writer of Hebrews reminds us: *“For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come!”* (Hebrews 13:14) Yes, there are many times in the Bible when God’s own people were blessed with a great deal of wealth and power, but this should never become our greatest ambition in life!

So now, I am hoping that you will allow me to ask each of you a question: When you were children: (1) How important was it to you, that you wanted your parents to be proud of you? (2) And if you wanted your parents to be proud of you, what was the primary reason, you wanted your parents to be proud of you? Didn’t you want your parents to be proud of you because of your intense love for them, as you came to realize more and more how intensely that they had always loved and would always love you? The same thing should be true in our relationship with the Triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit!

I can remember that when I was a much younger pastor serving Immanuel Lutheran Church in Simpsonville, South Carolina in the early 1990s, that I visited a gentleman who was a very active member of that congregation who had served our nation in the Marine Corps for 20 years, but who was by that time now

working as a civilian in another profession. His wife was not at home on that evening when I called upon him, because she was working the night shift as an “RN,” at Greenville Memorial Hospital.

When I visited this man, however, he very much wanted to show me pictures of his family; not something a man usually does, though it happens upon occasion. He showed me pictures not only of his wife and himself, but also pictures of his three grown sons, their wives, and his grandchildren. This man told me that he and his wife were so proud of their three grown sons, who had all graduated from college; who were all married with children of their own, who were now, thank the Lord, all gainfully employed in some pretty impressive careers. On that day I visited him, that man told me that the whole time when his boys were growing up, he kept saying to his children: “Boys, make your mother proud of you! Make your mother and me both proud of you! Make your parents proud of you!”

And yet, as I got to know this man, better and better, I soon came to realize that this gentleman had NOT repeated that same message to his sons the whole time that they were growing up, primarily for his own benefit, nor primarily for the benefit of his wife either! He wanted them to experience for themselves, the kind of life that he and his wife had been experiencing, for the most part, up to that point—something that we might call “the good life.” It wasn’t a problem-free life, by any means, but it was a very respectable life, in which they were, to a large degree, very grateful for all that they had, and seemingly, most always content and satisfied with things in their lives the way that they were!

And yet this man also believed that the kind of life he and his wife had been fortunate enough to experience, and that he wanted his children all throughout their lives to experience, was not simply a fluke, or a stroke of good luck, or accidental at all! Nor was it simply the result of good Karma, or just a matter of fate or simply because he and his wife and his children had all been dealt such a great hand of cards in this life!

No, this man, who was a very devout Christian and did his best to raise his sons to be very devout Christians, attributed everything in his life that was proper, and right, and good—solely to God—and solely to the grace of God as he had come to experience it all throughout his life through his personal faith and relationship with Jesus Christ.

Tonight we are celebrating our Savior’s birth, and we are hopefully also celebrating the fact that if there has ever been anything good that has resulted for us in this life it has always been the direct result of God’s grace at work in our lives, while we are “*strangers and pilgrims here on this earth*” (*Hebrews 11:13*).

This night we are celebrating the birth of our Savior, and through the gift of his Son, St. Paul is reminding us that God has brought the gift of his salvation to us. To be saved means to be put in a right relationship with God, so that we can now say with respect to him, what that talented actress Sally Fields said on the stage that night back in 1984 when she received an Academy Award for the role she played in the film “Places in the Heart.” -- As part of her acceptance speech, she exclaimed: “You like me! You really do like me!”

But “like” isn’t a strong enough word here, as we think about our God and the gift of his Son who was born to be our Savior. When we heed Paul’s advice to Titus and by remembering all that God had done for us and the whole human race, bringing to us and to all people the gift of his salvation, teaching us that denying ungodliness and all worldly lusts that we should live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world, looking for the blessed hope and appearing of our great God and our Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a peculiar people zealous to do good works!” (Titus 2:11-14), we should shout out aloud to him: “You love me, you really love me!

Tonight St. Paul is reminding us that we are currently living between those two great epiphanies of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. There was his first epiphany that took place in that little town of Bethlehem, where our Savior was born, who slept on a manger bed of straw in a small stone animal trough that served as his cradle, with his Mother Mary and Joseph standing close by! This first epiphany also resulted in our Lord’s living out his perfect life for us that we could never live, and then dying on the cross in our stead, being raised from the dead again on the third day to bring us the forgiveness of all our sins and eternal life!

But now, as we are also awaiting that second epiphany of our Lord, who will come again in glory and great honor surrounded by the very angels of heaven, with a loud trumpet blast, to precede him—we want to

live lives that glorify him and serve the needs of others all around us!

Why did God think of Christmas? Because, despite our best efforts:

(1) We all needed and still need a pardon for our sin; even those parents whom we admired and loved so dearly, were sinners too, who needed pardon for their sins.

(2) Secondly, because we all need power to live the new kind of life God wants us to live out in this world in the gift of his Son our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And there is no greater motivation for that ever, than to live with constant expectation that he soon will come again!

(3) And thirdly God thought of Christmas because we all need HOPE for the FUTURE.

What is there that alone has the power to keep us going through tough times when we all might very well be tempted to throw in the towel and call it quits? It's the blessed assurance that our eternal salvation is now a finished work, therefore our future place with our God in heaven is made absolutely secure!

Well, here we are again this night, and once again it seems to us as though that glorious Christmas angel has returned to our beautifully decorated church—with his magic wand in his hand. And suddenly, now, the center aisle in our sanctuary becomes for us the road to Bethlehem. You worshipers are transformed into reverent shepherds, who have come here again this night to see this great thing that has come to pass. You choir members, up there in the balcony, are collectively that whole multitude of the heavenly hosts who were praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:13)!

Our chancel becomes the stable. Our altar becomes the manger. The lights on the Christmas trees become for us the sparkling stars that were in the sky that night. The two candles on the altar remind us that our Savior always comes to us in our celebrations of the Holy Eucharist with both his divine and human natures. But why was the Prince of Peace be born in such a humble setting?

Would we have passed up Caesar's marble palace in Rome or the temple in Jerusalem to have the Savior born in a little town on the edge of nowhere like Bethlehem in Judea? Would we have had him born to a poor teenage peasant girl dressed in coarse homespun clothing from such an obscure little town of Nazareth in the despised province of Galilee?

Would we have had him born in the darkness of night and in the cold of winter in a stable cave, with no heat or light save a flickering oil lamp and no running water? Would we have chosen as his attendants the oxen and donkeys, whose breath helped to keep him warm? We would have chosen as the cradle and old chipped stone feeding trough? Would we have selected for his first human witnesses to be simple shepherds—men beyond the pale—who could neither read nor write—who were ceremoniously unclean—wanderers—men who were not even allowed to bring testimony in court?

Nevertheless we celebrate that the God of all creation once invaded our human history, splitting all recognition of time into two major segments: BC, before Christ, and AD, Anno Domini, two Latin words meaning in the year of our Lord.

Why did God think of Christmas? St. Paul certainly seeks to answer this question very beautifully for us in the words of our epistle lesson again tonight! The God of a million, million birthdays, laid his Son on the doorstep of the world to rescue us, for in the human flesh of his only-begotten Son, the grace of God has appeared visibly, dramatically and miraculously among us, so that the free gift of salvation might be offered to all people everywhere to give healing and housekeeping and hope!

God has been so generous to us! Will we in return be generous in 2016 in showing our gratitude to him with more than just words, but also with our time and our talents and our treasures?

I like the story I heard about one businessman who was away from home on a business trip the week before Christmas. Fortunately, there was a rather large shopping mall located across the street from the Embassy Suites Hotel where he was staying. Therefore one night, after supper, when his business had been concluded for that day, he went to the mall to buy his wife a Christmas present. He went to the cosmetic counter in Dillard's and told the salesgirl that he wanted to buy a bottle of perfume for his wife.

She showed him a bottle costing \$50.

"That's a bit much," said Bill, so she returned with a smaller bottle for \$30.

"That's still quite a bit," Bill grunted.

Growing disgusted, the clerk brought out a tiny, tiny little \$15 bottle of perfume, certainly the cheapest thing you could ever purchase from the cosmetic counter in Dillard's.

But would you believe it? This business named Bill only grew agitated, "What I mean," he said, "is I'd like to see something really cheap." So can you imagine what happened next?

The clerk handed him a mirror!

We all know that we have also heard a great deal about political correctness in our present presidential contest going on here in the United States! While some degree of political correctness may have some merit for us in not speaking in an insulting or in a derogatory way about others, we know that political correctness can be taken too far when we Christians are no longer expected to be bold in our witness to the Gospel in this world. The other day I came across one attempt of a writer, however, to be politically correct is this Holy Season. Listen how he voiced his observance of Christmas: "Please accept without obligation, expressed or implied, these best wishes for an environmentally safe, socially responsible, low stress, non-addictive, and gender neutral celebration of the winter solstice holiday as practiced within the most enjoyable traditions of the religious persuasion of your choice!

Furthermore, we extend to you and yours also best wishes for a financially successful, personally fulfilling, and medically uncomplicated experience in the New Year! And please know that these preceding wishes are extended to you 100% without regard to the race, creed, color, age, physical ability, religious faith, choice of computer platform, or any other distinctive qualities that might otherwise disqualify you from receiving this benevolent card!"

You know what I say to all of that! Bah-humbug! Let's celebrate again this night with everything that is true about us, with our hearts and souls and bodies and lives our Savior's birth! "Joy to the world, the Lord has come! Let earth receive her King! Let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing..." Amen