

The Nativity of Our Lord: Christmas Eve

December 24, 2019

Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Titus 2:11-14 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, 12 training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, 13 waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, 14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. (ESV)

“Christmas Giving Allows Real Living”

Christmas is not a story. Let's compare some well-known stories with the account of Christmas. "It began with the forging of the Great Rings...One ring to rule them all." (The Fellowship of the Ring) And then we have: **“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)”** (Luke 2:1,2) How about “Once upon a time in a galaxy far, far away” compared to **“So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.”** (Luke 2:4) Then we have the opening of the Snow Queen, the basis for Frozen: “Right then! Time to start. When we're at the end of the story we'll know more than we do now, for it has to do with an evil ogre!” Not the same as **“He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.”** (Luke 2:5-7)

Stories can inspire and entertain. They can capture our imaginations. Cause us to reflect on beauty and tragedy. Bring intense joy or sadness. Christmas is not just a story. You can call it an episode or an event or an occurrence. Titus 2:11 tells us God's grace appeared. Luke 2 tells us the historical details of when and where and who. Christmas is a real, historical event that actually happened, meant to really change your life. God's grace appearing at the birth of Jesus is God's Christmas real gift to humanity. Since it really happened, Jesus brings a real change to your life.

Now we certainly aren't going to enforce requirements that everyone celebrate Christmas in the same way. But how we treat the news of Jesus' birth makes all the difference for us. We can move on to Jesus after the elf has been taken down from the shelf and the evidence of reindeer hoof prints has melted away from rooftops. Or we can make Jesus, who he is and what he came to do on this earth, the core and center, the most important and essential aspect of the whole holiday. For Christians, for people who take the Bible seriously, the real events of the life of Jesus show us real Christmas giving. And from that giving we have real living.

The trouble with myths and legends and stories is how they impact you or how you choose to have them impact you. It's all subjective. It's completely up to you. Even the creators will encourage you to find your own meaning in their artwork, taking from them whatever you want, to benefit from them in the manner of your choosing. You can even do what serious Star Wars fans do, pointing out how you would have done it differently.

Christmas doesn't allow us to do that. Titus teaches us that God's grace appeared to **"bringing salvation for all people."** (Titus 2:11 ESV) Salvation is an offensive gift at Christmas.

This is the time of year when lots of people will offer their best opinions about what Christmas means. Christmas means that light will triumph over darkness. Christmas means humanity can achieve unity and peace. Guest columns suggest ways we can put aside our differences so we can celebrate the holidays in harmony. Editorials advocate finding common ground in what all human beings long for and what to get out of life. But Titus teaches us Christmas is about a struggle. Struggle involves renouncing our own paths. It means denial of what comes most naturally to us. Christmas is offensive because it says you will not be able to achieve peace or harmony by yourself. Joy can't be found in continuing down your own way. Hope can't be found by writing your own story. Christmas is insulting because it says the problems of our world start in your own heart. That's where you need to start. But the offensive news of Christmas brings the promise of a better life because of a better hope.

Let's look at the evidence. Our society treats Christmas as a special day. An important holiday. A time to put everything on hold for a day or even a few hours. To pause from our normal existence and take a break from our regular concerns. But then we get back to life as usual only changed by a few added pounds and a shrinking bank account. In fact, Web MD identifies some factors that contribute to the holiday blues. This is actually a tougher time of year for a lot of us because it increases our stress, all the activities make us more fatigued. It has become over-commercialized. We incur greater financial stress. We suffer from unrealistic expectations. So Christmas becomes an add-on to our already hectic and chaotic lives. In so many ways Christmas can be a special time to create special memories. But in other ways, Christmas can cause more problems. That is, if we fail to take these words from Titus seriously. Grace makes a difference. God's grace at Christmas changes lives: **"the grace of God has appeared...training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions."** (Titus 2:11,12) It is designed to cause us to rethink and reevaluate our entire lives.

The greatest tragedy of Christmas would be to go on with life as usual, resume your regularly-scheduled existence.

God's grace brings hope. Jedis can find strength from Skywalkers who share the Force. Titus promises real hope now to battle against the increased stress and fatigue of Christmas. Hope-filled living in the present is based on what Jesus accomplished by his first coming in the past. We overlook the main impact of the birth of Jesus when we only focus on the baby in Bethlehem. Titus teaches us what Jesus was born to do: **"who gave himself for us to**

redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession.” (Titus 2:14) Jesus Christ gave himself for us. Jesus is your Christmas gift. Jesus lived his entire life denying any impulses that would put God’s perfect plans at risk. Jesus never gave in to any desire that would have meant indulgence for him and rejection of God’s perfect will. Jesus had a perfect track record of self-control even when enemies attempted to trap him and criminals taunted. Jesus lived righteously under God’s constant approval, pleasing God by everything he did. Jesus lived every hour of every day under complete conformity to God’s design.

Jesus is your gift of grace. Grace is probably one of the most misunderstood spiritual concepts. Medieval understanding of grace viewed God’s gifts like a boost or shot in the arm. There was even a well-known saying that “God does not deny grace to the man who does his best.” (McGrath, p. 60) But when Jesus gave you grace, he gave you himself as the Christmas gift. What that means is the Jesus didn’t wait for you to do your best and then make up what was still lacking by God’s requirements. Jesus didn’t sit back and watch as you performed up to your potential and then accepted your life based on your best efforts. Jesus didn’t give himself so that you could be motivated to eventually do better and live a cleaner life. No, Jesus gave up his entire life to free you from the prison of never being able to have a good enough life on your own to please God. Jesus gave his spotless life as a sacrifice to sponge away your impurities. Jesus offered himself so you could have his purity.

Peace, joy and hope are common themes this time of year. For Christians, hope isn’t just a feeling. Hope for the future is tied to our **“great God and Savior Jesus Christ.”** (Titus 2:13) Our great God and Savior gave himself to redeem and purify his people. Because Jesus came to rescue and cleanse his people, you have a very different life. To go on just tweaking your life after the birth of Jesus would be to really miss out on the blessed hope we have because of God’s grace.

Why, again, do so many get the holiday blues? Stress. Fatigue. Over-commercialization. Financial burdens. Unreasonable expectations. God’s grace in Jesus Christ doesn’t take all of our problems away. Actually, this is one of the most common misconceptions about Christianity. That Christianity isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Life doesn’t always get easier. Things don’t automatically fall into place when God’s grace takes up residence in your heart. In fact, the Bible teaches life might actually get tougher instead of easier. But you will have a different life. A different character and quality of life.

When you are discouraged, sad, angry, lonely or disappointed, you still have life. Christmas isn’t just a story. You still have real life with Jesus. When you have failed to live up to your own expectations, you see yourself the way God sees you because of the sacrifice of Jesus. Purified. Cleansed. When you are angry and frustrated that things don’t go according to plan, you are redeemed, set free from putting too much value and importance on those things. When people upset you and infuriate you, God’s grace is yours in the forgiveness that comes from Jesus Christ. The blessed hope you have in Jesus can’t be destroyed by the worst things this life can throw at you. God’s grace in Jesus is **“training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives**

in the present age.” (Titus 2:12) The things that come naturally to us, the impulses that try to take control subconsciously are not your new life in Christ.

Sometimes true stories give us greater courage than fiction. You might remember the name Lamar Odom. Basketball fans remember a first round draft pick into the NBA, all-star and world champion with the Los Angeles Lakers. Reality TV fans will remember his marriage to Khloe Kardashian. Or maybe you remember the headlines from 2015 when Lamar Odom was found comatose in a Nevada brothel. Now he is making headlines because he has made it clear he won't have sex with his fiancée until they are married. No longer addicted to cocaine or marijuana, sex or pornography, Odom got advice from his pastor that he could honor God by withhold from sex until he got married. It's something he had never considered. Doing what felt good at the moment just came most naturally. God's grace is training. God's grace is at work to show a better, more hope-filled life.

The grace that gives you the greatest Christmas gift in Jesus Christ gives you real life. That gift is still at work in you, refreshing and revitalizing you with the hope of Jesus' return.

Stories can do that. But the best stories give glimpses into God's greatest episode to rescue all of humanity. J. R. R. Tolkien, author of The Lord of the Rings calls the historical events of the life of Jesus eucatastrophe, a catastrophe that is universally good and noble and beneficial. He says: "The birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation... There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many skeptical men have accepted as true on its own merits." (Montgomery, p. 142) Christmas isn't a story. Jesus come to earth is God's real life Christmas gift to you. Because of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus you have God's grace. God's grace gives you real life. Now and forever. Amen.