

A Sermon for Christmas Eve 2008

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“The grace of God that brings salvation has 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 appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ (From the Christmas Eve epistle, Titus 2:11f.).

It is instructive that the Christmas Eve epistle and collect (Titus 2:11f., BCP 98) both mention the Second Coming of Jesus. This was an Advent theme and now we are celebrating his birth. We might think that the focus would be entirely on the present event that is in front of us.

However, the major celebrations of our faith always connect with the past and future as well as the present. We continually remember how God’s past promises are fulfilled in the present; and how the present fulfillment points to some greater fulfillment in the future. As God said in Revelation, “I am the Alpha and the Omega...who is and who was and who is to come” (1:8).

At Christmas, we remember that God has been faithful to his past promises. Hundreds of years before Christ, the prophet Micah wrote,

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting (Micah 5:2).

Now, the one from everlasting is born in Bethlehem, in fulfillment of prophesy. Hundreds of years before Christ, the prophet Isaiah wrote, “The Virgin shall conceive and bear a son and his name shall be called Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). And again,

Unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder...upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish...for ever” (9:6-7 KJV).

Now Jesus is born of a virgin; God is with us; the promised descendant of David, who will be king forever, is here, in fulfillment of prophesy.

At Christmas we focus on how God is with us now. Jesus in the manger at Bethlehem is the beginning of God’s new creation (Isaiah 66:22, Rev. 21:5). Genesis tells us that God made the heavens and the earth and said, “It is good.” Then sin entered the world and touched the whole creation.

Now, the Word, who was in the beginning with God (John 1:1), is made flesh and dwells among us. Here is human life, in the fullness of God’s image, born “without spot of sin to make us clean from all sin” (BCP 77). God points us to the manger and says, again, “It is good.”

We receive the new life of Bethlehem through baptism and faith. As Jesus said, “He who believes in me has everlasting life” (John 6:47). Through faith in the Son of God, we can begin to live new lives; we can become part of God’s new creation, God can say, of *us*, “It is good.”

Then Christmas causes us to look to the future. Jesus in the manger is the promise that the new creation will be brought to completion. We long for the day when the lion shall lie down with the lamb (Is. 11:6); when the swords shall be beaten into plowshares (Is. 2:4); when the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established on the top of the mountains (Is. 2:2); when earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Is. 11:9).

We long for the day when, as Revelation says, “God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away” (21:4). We look for that “blessed hope and glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:11f.).

The past promises of God are fulfilled in the present giving us a future hope. This tells us that our God is the Lord of history. This is a subtle theme of our Christmas gospel. St. Luke begins by telling us, “A decree went out from Caesar Augustus.” Caesar, ruler of the world, compels the holy family to move at his bidding. Yet, we look more closely and realize that the Bethlehem birth was ordained by God in prophecy. Caesar is, in fact, the pawn in the larger purposes of God.

Psalms 2 tells us about God’s decree that answers the decree of Caesar: “Thou art my Son. Today have I begotten thee. Desire of me, and I will give thee the nations for thine inheritance and the utmost parts of the world for thy possession” (Psalm 2:7-8).

If you were alive at the time of Christ, you wouldn’t have known that most historically important event was taking place in the Bethlehem stable. You would have thought that the fate of the world was in the hands of Caesar or some other ruler who was plotting against him. But two thousand years later, two billion people confess that Jesus is Lord, and Caesar is a chapter in history.

We look at the current crises in our economy and around the world and wonder who is in control. If we look only at the visible evidence, we might think the fate of the world is in the hands of some world leader or violent extremist. Christmas teaches us that, now as then, God is in control, working out his purposes in his subtle but completely sovereign way. Now, as then, the most historically significant things are happening in the humble places where Jesus is—in the lives and heart and minds of those who put their faith in him.

The Lord of creation and history is in the manger, in fulfillment of prophecy. He lives in us by faith, giving us the hope and promise that he will bring the creation to the redemptive conclusion he has planned for it.

For God is “the Alpha and the Omega...who is and who was and who is to come”

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