

## Sermon for Christmas Day

**Prayer of the Day:** *Almighty God, grant that the birth of Your only-begotten Son in the flesh may set us free from the bondage of sin; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

**The Word of God for this Sermon is written in Titus 3, 4-7:** But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

*Come Holy Spirit, open our ears, enlighten our minds and fill our hearts with Your Word. Let it make room in our hearts. Amen.*

### Dear Congregation in Christ!

On Christmas-Eve we heard that the Grace of God appeared when Jesus was born as a little boy. The Grace of God became flesh, became a person. This bodily presence of the Grace of God was the Salvation for all people.

In the Word of God for today, we are reminded, that the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Word became flesh, has everything to do with our Salvation through Baptism. Our Baptism and the incarnation of Jesus are very closely related.

Jesus Christ becoming man, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born by the virgin Mary is the goodness, the friendliness and kindness of God our Saviour. By becoming a child of man He made us to become children of God. The emphasis is most definitely on Him saving us.

We have to see this anew today, how much humankind, in it's natural state, after the fall into sin, was and still is stuck in blindness and in sheer evilness. It is not natural, that God's mercy, His friendliness and His loving kindness is believed, taught and confessed.

Many people, who claim to be using their rational mind, point to all the devastating suffering you may find on this earth. Where is the kindness and love of God in Egypt for instance, they ask? How can God allow so much suffering to happen? What is God's answer to these questions?

God has an answer: God has done so much, in fact He has done everything to give us new life. The problem of natural mankind is that it looks far too shallow, it expects God's mercy to be as they would like to have it. They expect God to send them a role-model, someone to look up to,

whom they then can follow and do what He does. They want a religious leader who can tell them the “how to”. That is all they expect of their Christ. They don't realise that that is not nearly enough.

The problem lies not only outside Christianity, but also very much inside Christianity.

Jesus is our Saviour from eternal death and Satan. That is the important part to keep pure. Paul emphasizes this fundamental part of the Gospel by stressing that it was, (quote), "Not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness." Somehow men and women - even in the Church - can look at the Manger in Bethlehem, the Incarnation, the entire Passion of our Lord, the Cross and everything, and still try to make our salvation about us and our behaviour, or our decisions, or our prayers. That is the direction our old nature is pulling us to.

The more the Church embraces and sees nothing wrong in importing marketing strategies into it's doing, the more self- and man- centred it becomes. In a market environment the customer is always right. You don't try and change the mind of the customer, you give him what he chooses. At best you give him a number of possibilities from which he may choose. That is exactly the tendency we see in our Church culture today. “Customers” are hopping from one church to another to look for the best place to fulfil their felt needs.

And many, unknowingly support this theology of choice, as if man stands in a neutral position between evil and God and 'just' has to choose which way to go. It is very easy to slide back into this religious groove.

In the verses before our word for today Paul denies this thinking [3]: **“For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.”** Definitely not a description of someone who is in a position to choose. A slave has no choice. He is enslaved, already under the power of his master. In the case of the unbeliever, Paul says that they were slaves to various passions and pleasures. They were led astray. They were passive and couldn't help themselves, dragged around by their passions and desires. Please note that Paul includes himself in this statement while he was a Pharisee. So, the phrase 'being enslaved to various passions' includes religious passions of all sorts who are not according to the revealed Mercy of God.

We are not saved by the mercy as humanism understands it. We are saved by God's Mercy. And that is a very specific Mercy which works against culture. God's Mercy is revealed here [5]: **...”by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit,...”**. That is Baptism.

Baptism is a washing of regeneration, rebirth, re-creation. It is a birthing, creating, life-giving water. It is a water through which we are born anew with a heavenly birth, not of the will of our flesh but of the will of God. Here the Spirit again hovers over the water, as He once did at the creation. Here God again speaks His creative Word. Something new takes place. We become new creatures in Baptism, born of the water and Spirit by the Word of God. "If anyone is in Christ (and "in Christ" means baptised for St. Paul), he is a new creation." That's why the baptisteries of the early church had scenes from the Garden of Eden painted on the walls. That's why candidates in the early church were baptised completely naked, even without jewellery. Baptism is Paradise restored through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The old has gone, the new has come. God and man are once again reconciled, at peace, at one, in harmony, as it was in the beginning, is now in the water of Baptism, and ever shall be.

Baptism is also a washing of renewal. It is not only a life-giving water, it is also a life-sustaining and cleansing water. This is living water, made alive by the Lord and Giver of Life, poured out on us through Jesus Christ our Saviour, washing us from the leprous stain of our sin. The filth of our lies, our deceits, our adulteries, our lust, our anger, our prejudice, our greed, our gossip, all that proceeds out of our hearts is washed away in this flood of God's grace. Our guilt and shame is dissolved and lifted from us. At His transfiguration, Jesus' clothing shined brighter than any soap on earth could bleach them. In Baptism, our priestly vestments shine before God in heaven with the same heavenly brightness, brighter than any work of ours could bleach them.

Baptism is water connected to the Word of Christ's command. Jesus established Baptism. He commanded this water. It is His Baptism, not the Church's, not ours. The Church obeys the command of Christ when she baptises and teaches. That's what the Church and her Ministry are given to do. That's how disciples of Jesus are made, and Jesus has given us no other way.

This disciple-making command of Jesus connected to the water gives us confidence. Jesus is with us in this activity. He approves of it. He authorizes it. He promises to be with it and in it. Though we see a man's hand pouring the water, it is nonetheless God's hand. Though we hear a man's voice speak the words, it is nonetheless God's voice. Baptism is God's Word and work, not our work. We are on the receiving end of the gifts. God is the Giver. When the world asks why we are baptising, we need only answer, "The Lord commands it." Why do we baptise our babies? The Lord commands it. Why do we insist that Baptism is necessary for salvation? The Lord commands it. It is His Baptism; we only work here.

Through this special Mercy of God, we are saved. Salvation means release, rescue, the removal of the barriers and confines that hem us in. It is to be brought out of a cage into an open field, out of a narrow prison cell into a wide open place filled with light and air. Baptism gives us room to breath, to work, to pray, praise and give thanks, to serve others. “To be saved is nothing else than to be delivered from sin, death, and the devil, and to enter into the kingdom of Christ and live with Him forever.” Through the Red Sea, a people in bondage were set free. Through the “Red Sea” of Baptism, we are set free to be God’s people, to live under His Lordship, to serve Him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.

That is what the goodness, the friendliness and loving kindness of God our Saviour wants and does for us. His Holy Spirit has been poured on us richly in abundance. Do you see, how extremely rich you are?

And this is for real. This saying is trustworthy. This word has not a human origin. Therefore, Paul urges Titus to insist on these things. Therefore, I insist on it as well. Receive this present of God once again. It is a present you will never stop unpacking. Thanks be to God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.     *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.***

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*Some parts of this sermon originate from Rev. Cwirla's sermon, from the LCMS.*