

Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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December 24, 2005
Christmas Eve (Candlelight Worship)
Titus 2:11-14
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 96
Second Lesson: Titus 2:11-14
Gospel: Luke 2:1-20

Look at What Has Appeared

The sight of our tree when I was a child was always a thrill. But it even got to be more of a thrill when there were all of those presents piled underneath it when you went to open them. Then I didn't notice the lights so much as I noticed the wrapping paper, and I didn't really notice the wrapping paper so much as knowing that there was something inside the wrapping paper that was going to be for me. But bright, shiny wrapping paper at times can be deceiving, can't it? It looks like all the other presents, but sometimes appearances can deceive you.

When I was in high school, I remember my little sister who was in grade school complaining about not getting enough gifts. So I decided that year that she should get all kinds of gifts. So what I did was when she was some place else that day, I went upstairs and picked up all the dirty clothes off her floor and wrapped them and placed them under the tree. She was so excited to have so many gifts until she kept seeing that she had something just like that upstairs and it dawned on her that this was all the clothes she didn't pick up when mom told her to.

Appearances can be deceiving. The appearance of the Son of God, the Son of God appearing in a manger, coming and making not a splash, not even hardly a ripple, is kind of deceiving. It would take something pointing it out to you to say, "Look here. Look at what has appeared. It is not what you think. It is not what you would expect. It's not where you would expect." And it certainly isn't why you would think God would come to this earth. Every one of us born in this world has a conscience, we know our own sin. We know when we have messed up and we expect God to come into the room with us. We would expect to be terrified just like the shepherds were when they saw the holy angels. But God doesn't come to this earth to terrify. He wasn't born in Bethlehem to terrify. He wasn't born in Bethlehem to show us what to do so that we could be saved. When God says to us through the angels, through the evangelists, through all of those that wrote Holy Scripture through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, "Look at this", what he wants us to focus on in Christ's appearance is grace—undeserved love for undeserving sinners. Saving grace that appeared not just to all men, but saving grace that appeared that is for all men so the salvation for all men has appeared is literally what he is talking about. Saving grace for all has appeared.

And then through the apostle Paul this evening, God reminds us that this saving grace changes us. It turns us completely around, not only in saving us, but it changes our hearts completely. It gives us another purpose. It gives us another reason for life. It gives us something that we could not have if it would not be for saving grace.

Saving grace is what the angels pointed the shepherd to, isn't it? *"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."* Isaiah had talked about receiving double for all your sins, in Isaiah 40, that your sins will be taken away. Throughout history God has promised that there would be one who would come and he would give what we so desperately need. He would give us God's love because we can't earn it.

Saving grace of God that brings salvation and saving grace for all men has appeared—that is what Paul wanted to remind Titus was the one thing that he had to hold out as a pastor in front of the people that he was serving there on the Island of Crete. Saving grace—because we can't do it on our own. We can't earn it, we can't deserve it, we can't be good and do good so that God will say, "You have done enough. I am going to let you into my heaven." We could never do it. We are so corrupted by sin. We are so busy (when we think that we have done something good) patting ourselves on the back, that we have crossed over the line from serving God out of love for him to serving God out of love for giving thanks and being patted on the back. The sinful pride becomes a beast.

We can even turn gift giving, can't we, into a contest? They are going to like my gift better than they are going to like your gift—have you ever had that conversation with someone? We can take trying to imitate God's love at this time of the year and our sinful nature can turn it right into sin—sinful pride. That is why we need God's saving grace so desperately, because we can become so accustomed to our own sinfulness that we don't even notice it. We don't even acknowledge it, or we pass it off as not as bad as so and so. We need God's saving grace to appear to take away every last one of our sins, even the sins you and I don't know we've committed, even the hurts we've cost someone else that we didn't know, that we didn't intend, but we did it just the same. We need God to come and have his saving grace appear to us and take away every last one of our sins and that is why Jesus came and was born.

Born of a woman so that he could be under the law to redeem us to buy us back from our sins and the guilt of our sins, but also true God so that his death on the cross would count for every last one of us because no man can redeem the life of another as God tells us. But God who was perfect in our place, and God who died in our place, that takes away our sins. That is saving grace. That is why he came and was willing to lie where cattle maybe recently had been eating, to be in that manger, to be in those humble circumstances, but those humble circumstances really lead to the cross, like we just sang. What Child Is This—did you notice the second stanza took you right from the stable to the cross? Nails, spears piercing through, the cross he bears for me, for you—that is saving grace—born so that he could pay for our sins. Born so that it would pay not just for yours and mine, not just for those who believe, but for every last person that ever has lived or ever will live—this is the confidence we can have.

This confidence makes every difference in the world as we face difficulty, as we face challenges in this world, as we face uncertainties, as we face things that we don't want to face, because God's saving grace has appeared and it has done this for me and for you. We know he is going to be with us and sustain us through anything we face. The

confidence that we have in that is the cross. That cross not only gives us confidence, it changes us. As Paul says, *"It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions."* It teaches us to say "No" to what our sinful nature wants to scream yes to.

Now our sinful nature at times can be silenced with threats, can't it? If you do that, then you are going to be punished. Don't we do that a little bit this time of the year? Talking about making a list and checking it twice and if you are not good, you are not going to get a gift—don't we kind of crowd that in around this time of the year? The idea that the reason you want to be good is so that you get something out of it. God teaches us to say "No" to worldly passions and to say "Yes" to something—to say "Yes" to living for God to thank him that he appeared and lived and died in our place and took away our sins. Doing it not out of a fear for punishment, not out of a fear that otherwise God is going to let us have it, but doing it because God has already let us have it—he has let us have heaven. He sent the Son to live and die and so as we wait for the blessed hope of his glorious appearance, we live wanting to thank him, wanting to say "No" to things that God says no to, wanting to say "Yes" to things that God says yes to, being eager to do what our sinful nature doesn't necessarily want us to do—that is what makes life in this world a constant struggle and a constant battle for us as Christians. We are constantly fighting against our sinful nature and the only thing that empowers us to overcome it is the knowledge that God took away our sins, that God loved us enough not only to be born, but to die—not only enough to come once many years ago in Bethlehem, but to come to us day after day through Word and Sacrament and say to us, "I love you. I love you deeply. I love you perfectly. I love you when you love me and I love you when you have screwed up. My love for you is constant and here is the evidence—I lived and died in your place." That is what enables us to say "No". That is what enables us to want to do what God wants us to do, not out of fear, but out of love, because he first loved us.

Then we give of ourselves, but not just by exchanging gifts with one another. We give God the gift day after day of living in a way that says "Thank you. Thank you for heaven. Thank you for the Spirit who led me to believe what I could not figure out on my own. Thank you that you have a place waiting for me. Thank you for giving me something to do until you take me there. Thank you for letting me live to your glory."

As we do that, the appearance of that to other people won't be deceiving. Our lives won't be brightly wrapped in an outward shell of godliness but inwardly we are doing it for the wrong reasons—what is on the outside then matches what is on the inside. God is glorified, and we will get the chance to tell people why as we point people to our Savior.