

Celebrating and Living in God's Grace **Titus 2:11-14**

Every year at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, there is displayed, beneath the great Christmas tree; a beautiful eighteenth century nativity scene. In many ways it is a very familiar scene. The usual characters are all there:

- shepherds roused from sleep by the voices of angels;
- the exotic wise men from the East,
- Joseph; Mary; the baby Jesus;

All are there, each figure an artistic marvel of wood, clay, and paint.

There is, however, something surprising about this scene; something unexpected, occasionally missed by the casual observer. What is strange is that the stable, and the shepherds, and the cradle are set, not in the expected small town of Bethlehem, but among the ruins of a mighty Roman city. The fragile manger is surrounded by broken and decaying columns.

Adapted from Thomas G. Long, *Something Is About To Happen*, CSS Publishing

Traditionally people have interpreted this artwork as a message about how Jesus' birth marked a new age; God's new age and the death of the old world. And that is certainly true. We now live in an age of grace; where the very presence of God among us announced His unconditional love for us which has the power to change everything.

But this year, in light of this past year's tragedies & disasters, in light of the dysfunctional politics of our nation, in light of the precarious economies of the world, and upon the fragility of the systems upon which

we've built our life here in the United States, I think again of this crèche exhibit and see not only the downfall of Rome, but of any society that fails to embrace the salvation God offers us in Jesus Christ.

Today we've gathered to celebrate God's greatest gift; a gift of hope, peace, joy and love that comes amid such worldly chaos; a gift of unlimited potential, but the question that needs to be asked this afternoon is simple; **have you ever made use of what God has given you at Christmas?** Do you celebrate God's gift in Christ? Do you live out the gift of Jesus with unlimited blessing for those who do?

"What do you mean?" you may ask. I know Jesus. I'm a member of the Church! I've accepted God's gift!

Think for a second about when our children or grandchildren are small at Christmastime or birthdays. Presents are thoughtfully bought and wrapped in anticipation of the joy those gifts will bring the little ones. But then, as often happens, when all the gifts are opened and assessed, the little ones decide to play with the box rather than with the gift that came in the box.

Have you ever made use of what God has given you at Christmas?

While I know that many have, my fear is that others have not. They know the gift; they received & opened it, but they don't use it. The gift of God in Christ is grace; it is salvation; and many don't use it!!!

1. For some, God's gift in Christ as seen as a "collectable"; something you display or store away for that rainy day.

People think, "I've got it for when I'll really need it, but I don't need it now. I've got God's salvation; I've "taken sides", I've declared my faith in Jesus. I'll just put that in the closet for now and bring it out when times get hard."

What such a strategy fails to note is that "faith" is a curious thing; it's not something you can easily store away. It's something that must be exercised; it must be worked or that faith dies. The Apostle James, who reminds us in his letter that faith without deeds is dead, went on to give an example:

James 2:20-24

²⁰ You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? ²¹ Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. ²³ And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. ²⁴ You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

While God's salvation has been offered to the world in Jesus, we can only take hold and embrace it with a faith that is alive and active.

As God showed us through John the Baptist, salvation begins with repentance; the active turning away from our sinful ways, and the active pursuit of God's righteousness. The grace of God in Christ has opened up this opportunity for faith to do its work.

Have you ever made use of what God has given you in Jesus?

The Apostle Paul wrote to Christians in Philippi:

Philippians 2:12-13

*¹² , my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—**continue** to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.*

Have you ever made use of what God has given you in Jesus?

2. Through faith, God's gift in Christ is something that is lived out with great celebration & transformation.

It literally changes everything; and that includes you and me.

God's gift in Christ is not like an autographed baseball you'll never throw, or a 1st edition Spiderman Comic book you'll never take out of its protective sleeve. No, it's more like a treadmill, an elliptical or Bowflex that transform your bodies if you use them. God's gift in Christ is like a game of Scrabble or a crossword puzzle you play to sharpen your thinking.

As we remember Mary & Joseph's role in Jesus' birth, we can certainly see that God's gift of salvation requires active participation. It is a physical, social and emotional journey when we put faith in God and give our lives over to God to be transformed for His purposes.

The gift of God in Christ is something we are to use, to draw nearer to God, to grow in righteousness, to hear God's Word and to advance His Kingdom of Love and Grace that will stand strong even as the powerful Kingdoms of our world crumble.

Our faith takes Jesus, and what God offered us in Jesus, and applies it to all the world.

And when that happens, counterfeit joys & temporary hopes, and imperfect love and failed peace-plans fade away in light of what is real and eternal in the gift of Christ; which are:

Hope in God, Peace in God, Joy in God. Love from God.

The gift of God's grace means we can begin to transform today, to shed our brokenness and put on the righteousness of Christ. God's Spirit will guide our transformation if we are willing to take our declarations of faith and put them into action.

This is what the Apostle Paul was writing about in his letter to Titus, a young disciple working within some of the early churches of Crete; which were allowing the low moral values of Crete to mold them rather than the righteousness of Jesus. As one commentator wrote:

Perhaps the Gospel of the grace of God had been misinterpreted to mean that salvation was unrelated to daily conduct.

D. Edmond Hiebert, "Titus", *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, (Frank E. Gaebelin, general editor, p. 423

(Maybe that's an accurate commentary on us as well!)

So Paul wrote to Titus:

Titus 2:11-14

¹¹ *For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.*

¹² *It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, ¹³ while we wait for the 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 wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.*

God's grace which transforms us; transforming our families, our homes, neighborhoods, towns and nation; does so when we begin to simply live right before God. This is what it means to "follow Jesus"; and when we do, the gift of the Christ-child finds its transforming purpose.

A simple crèche stands amid a crumbling world because the one lying in the manger is the Savior of the world. He is the grace of God who comes with a power to reconcile the world to God by inviting us to embrace Him, and by empowering us to be transformed into instruments of His reconciliation of this world.

Today if you find yourself feeling far from God because you've never understood Jesus, or you've misunderstood this gift of God's grace as something to be saved for a rainy day, then you've in good company, for the Bible tells story after story of people who, for one reason or another, lost sight of God and God's purposes for their lives.

But the Good News is that God's love never gives up on us. He is always close to us, and always wanting to be found by us. The promise we find early in the Bibles is this; that even if we've make the mistake of worshiped the dead and dying things of this world...

Deuteronomy 4:29

... if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul.

Today we have a choice:

- We can pretend that all is well with our faith; it's safe and secure in our closets. We call ourselves "Christians" ; literally, "little Christs" though our lives really don't look like Jesus', who trusted in His Heavenly Father's will & ways.

Or

- We can recognize God's closeness right now, and we can seek the Lord with all our hearts; we can run to the manger and embrace God's gift in Christ and live in Him; watching our lives and our world transformed through actions of faith.

Have you ever made use of what God has given you at Christmas?

Open the gift and let the baby Jesus change everything. Merry Christmas!