

First Sunday in Epiphany – January 10, 2016
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Titus 3:3-7

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. (4) But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, (5) he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, (6) whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, (7) so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

The 12 days of Christmas came to a close this past week. The 12 days begin on December 25 and end on the 6th of January. According to tradition, the song: *The Twelve Days of Christmas*, gave Christians a way to confess their faith at a time when Catholics were not allowed to openly practice their faith in England. The phrase “my true love gave to me” speaks of the gifts that God gives to his people. Here is one explanation of those gifts.

1. the partridge symbolized Christ and the protection he provides for those who are defenseless before Satan -- Adult partridges pretend to be injured to protect their young from predators. The pear tree is said to be a symbol of salvation – I wonder if it might also be a reminder of the tree of the cross.
2. 2 turtle doves remind us of the OT sacrifice of doves
3. the 3 French Hens – the wisemen or the virtues of faith, hope and love mentioned in 1 Corinthians 13:13.
4. The 4 calling birds represented the 4 Gospels
5. Golden Rings – the eternal endless nature of God’s love, the 5 books of the Law
6. geese laying – the six days of creation
7. seven swans – the seven gifts of the spirit
8. maids – the 8 blessings from the 8 beatitudes – from the first 12 verses of Matthew 5
9. ladies the nine fruits of the spirit (Galatians 5:22) But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,
10. lords leaping -- the ten commandments
11. pipers – the eleven faithful apostles
12. drummers – 12 minor prophets of the OT or the 12 tribes of Israel

With such an explanation we can see how the song would have helped to extend the celebration of Christmas with it’s daily reminders of the gifts our loving God has provided for his people.

The 12 days of Christmas have ended and now we have entered the church season of Epiphany which gives us the opportunity to reflect on the fact that **God our Savior Appeared**. Our text for today explains why Christ appeared.

God our Savior Appeared

- 1. To save us because of his mercy**
- 2. To save us through baptism**
- 3. So we might become heirs**

There's an interesting use of law and Gospel in our text today. The opening verse shows our need for the salvation which Christ came to win for us. **At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.**

At times, this former way of life still rears its ugly head in our lives. We foolishly think that we can ignore God's commands. We foolishly put ourselves our wants and desires ahead of God and his will. We let the passions and pleasures of this world determine our priorities, values and attitudes. We think ill of others, we are jealous of their positions and possessions. We let our anger drive us to hatred and feuds with those whom we ought to love.

The verse points out our need for salvation and helps us to realize what a wonderful gift God has given us by sending his Son to save us.

God our Savior Appeared to save us in his mercy. **But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, (5) he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.**

It's important for us to be reminded that the Babe of Bethlehem is true God in human form. Jesus came to reveal God's kindness and love. Kindness and love is exactly the opposite of what we deserve from God. Because of our sins – we deserve his wrath and punishment. Yet the Devil often succeeds in making us think that we're not all that bad. We begin to pat ourselves on the back and call attention to the things that we have done as if somehow they have earned us the right to be treated differently than others.

The Devil tries hard to convince us that somehow, somehow we can make a contribution to our salvation – maybe we should get credit for deciding to become a Christian. Maybe we should get credit for going to church. Maybe we should get credit for our faith – for the fact that we love God. Our text destroys those false notions by pointedly saying: He saved us not because of righteous things we had done. Because even our righteous acts are as filthy rags – there is no way that we can find a single thing to take credit for in regard to our salvation. The credit belongs to God alone! He saved us because of his mercy.

One of the best illustrations of mercy that I can think of is the story of a mother of a convicted man who stands before a judge and asks him to show mercy and be lenient as he sentenced her son. The judge replied that since her son was a convicted criminal that he didn't deserve mercy. The mother was undaunted. It's true he's guilty, but It wouldn't be mercy if he deserved it, she replied. And so it is with our sins. When we plead with God to be lenient with us, to not punish us in the way we deserve because of our sins -- we're asking him to give us something completely the opposite of what we deserve. We're asking for him to show us mercy and the good news of Christmas and Epiphany is that God our Savior appeared to save us because of his mercy.

He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, (6) whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior

In an act of mercy -- God himself became one of us. In an act of mercy, God placed himself under his own law. Is an act of mercy God humbled himself and subjected himself to the death which we deserved because of sins. And in an act of mercy God decreed that he would connect his word to water to wash away our sins and give us a new life. We're talking about what Jesus has done for us and we're talking about the wonderful sacrament which Jesus instituted when **Christ our Lord said in the last chapter of Matthew; Go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Therefore Baptism is not just plain water but it water used by God's command and connected with God's Word.** Through that Sacrament the Holy Spirit brings us to faith in Jesus as our Savior. Through that Sacrament God washes away our sins.

Baptism works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this as the words and promises of God declare. Christ our Lord says in the last chapter of Mark, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

Through that Sacrament God gives us new life. Through that Sacrament we are born again of water and the spirit.

In this new life, we have been set free from the control of sin and empowered to live for God. In Baptism we have been clothed with Christ’s righteousness. In Baptism we were linked with Christ’s death and resurrection. We died to sin so that we might live in innocence and purity before God.

Perhaps, if we think of baptism with a more common picture we can have a better understanding of the blessings God gives us in baptism and how those blessings affect our lives. Imagine that your little boy has just come home after playing in the mud. He’s wet, he’s dirty from head to toe and he’s supposed to be a ring bearer in his sisters wedding later in the day! There’s no time to get angry or upset – you take him immediately to the bathtub, you take off his dirty clothes – you scrub his hair and his face – you towel him off and dress him in his cute little tux for the wedding. What are your expectations for him? You expect that now he will stay out of the mud and act like a gentleman! What are the odds of that happening? By the end of that day, that new set of clothes will be dirty and soiled!

That’s a picture of what God has done for us in baptism. And, his expectations for us are similar. Stay out of the mud and filth of sin. Act like a child of God! But what do we do? Sadly, we often return to the mud and muck of our sinful ways. That is why Luther reminded us to make a daily use of our baptism by reminding us that **Baptism means that the old Adam in us should be drowned by daily contrition and repentance, and that all it’s evil deeds and desires be put to death. It also means that a new person should daily arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever. As St. Paul says in Romans, chapter 6, “We buried with Christ through baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”**

Because our sinful nature resists our attempts to live this new life, we daily need to get rid of that sinful nature by accepting the truth that we deserve eternal punishment in hell and by believing that God our Savior has appeared to save us in his mercy and to save us through baptism. That’s what Luther meant with the phrases contrition and repentance. Contrition is a recognition of our sins and guilt. Repentance includes a change of mind about sin and faith in Christ as our Savior.

Baptism reminds us that as Christians we are to live before God in pure living, thinking, and talking. More than that, Baptism gives the desire to live this new life in thanks for the blessings God has given us in Christ through baptism.

Now not only will we want to think of our baptisms each day, we will also want to want to hear and study the word of God regularly for the power to live the new life set in motion by our baptisms. Earlier in the book of Titus we read: (Titus 2:11-14) **For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. 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 glorious appearing 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.**

Our text concludes by reminding us: **God our Savior Appeared So we might become heirs. [God] saved us ... so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.**

In his grace, God has declared us not guilty of sin because Christ lived a perfect life for us and died for our sins. God saved us from the punishment of hell so that we might live forever as God's children.

No longer are we children of the devil – destined to eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels. God our Savior appeared so we might become heirs. He came to make us his children – destined to share glory with our brother Christ Jesus.

Without Christ our life was hopeless. With Christ our life is filled with hope. Just what does this mean? Again, a picture from ordinary life can help us understand. Have you ever heard of a hope chest? Young women or their mothers often store up linens, dishes, and other household goods in anticipation of marriage. Many times these hope chests and the items in them are prepared long before there are any solid prospects for marriage. My grandmother died when I was in 8th grade but before she died, she made each of her grandchildren a quilt as a wedding gift. She had the hope – we might say the confident expectation – that one day I'd get married and she wanted my bride and I to have that quilt as a gift. The quilt was there and I lived in the hope that one day I would actually be able to use it! At times it seemed like that time would never arrive but finally it came and the quilt now belongs to Barb and I.

In much the same way – God has prepared a gift for us. While it may seem like we'll never get to enjoy the perfection of Christ – God knows the day is coming when we will see Christ and be like Christ and enjoy perfection and glory for ever. God has appeared to give us the confident expectation of life in heaven. During the dark and dreary days of this lifetime when it seems as if we'll never get to enjoy eternal life -- Jesus shines forth brightly to chase away the shades of darkness and to fill us with the confident expectation of eternal life. In fact, Jesus' death and resurrection guarantees us eternal life – it's ready and waiting for us.

May God fill us with hope this Epiphany season as we once again are reminded that

God our Savior Appeared

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Amen.