



## Christmas Day (I)

### In the Flesh

[RCL] Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

Luke's nativity story is familiar to most of us, whether we know it or not. That famous account of Jesus' birth that we hear, year-in and year-out, begins with those ever-so recognizable lines, "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered..." You know where this one's going right from the very beginning.

Christians don't memorize much scripture anymore. Smartphone in hand, any one of us can command verse after verse with a few swipes of our thumb. Come to think of it, nobody memorizes much of anything at all anymore. Yet even today, the children in the Christmas pageant commit themselves to those words that seem to rain down from heaven: "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

The words from the letter to Titus, on the other hand, are not very well known to most of us. We are simply not as well acquainted with them as we are with Luke's. They don't provoke the same visceral awareness within us. They don't transport us into the past quite as suddenly. They don't put us in mind of singing carols or baking pies or unwrapping new pajamas.

The truth is, we often forget about the letter to Titus, and not just at Christmas time. "What's your favorite book of the Bible?" "Oh, Titus, for sure!" (said no one, ever.)

Another sentiment never overheard: "Oh, how I love Christmas Eve services each year! The family gathered together, the church glowing with candlelight, and just before the sequence hymn... the reading from Titus!" Something about it just doesn't sound quite right.

And yet here is Titus, enfolded neatly into our Christmas liturgy. Even at one of the most well-attended services of the year, I doubt if anyone leaves with Titus on their mind (or the sermon, for that matter). So, if you didn't recognize the passage, you're not alone. Titus makes a rare appearance in our common worship. In fact, Christmas is the only time the letter appears in the lectionary cycle. Because of that, and because this particular passage is so brief, it might just bear repeating.

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.”

Even though these words from Titus might not be quite as memorable as some others, they are surely just as applicable as we gather not only to observe the nativity but to celebrate the Incarnation.

You see, Christmas is just as much about giving birth to a firstborn son and wrapping him in bands of cloth and laying him in a manger as it is about the grace of God appearing, bringing salvation to all. In fact, they are two sides of the same coin, one in the very same.

At Christmas, God’s grace appears like never before: in the flesh. By coming in the flesh, God is making sure we understand how very close to us the holy presence really is. God not only wants us to see that presence, God invites us to feel it—in the flesh! And so that is precisely where grace appears.

Sure, we may catch the occasional glimpse of grace in other places: the rainbow-sherbet sky at dusk, the music of the song thrush, or looking down on the clouds from the view of a mountaintop perch. But all such moments of grace are happenstance, fleeting, sheer coincidence. But grace appearing in flesh? That is with us always! Because the flesh in which grace appears is our flesh. Becoming one of us is God’s way of telling us that our lives matter. It is to us, in these bodies, at this time and always, that grace appears.

Through the miracle of the Incarnation, God did away with the silly notion that we are mere drones slogging our way toward some heavenly home, slowly but surely trudging through the earthly muck and mire. By becoming flesh in this world, God sanctifies our flesh, making it possible for us to be agents of God’s grace – right here on earth. In other words, eternal life starts now. You don’t have to wait to get to heaven to live in God’s kingdom.

Ever since God appeared in a flesh like ours, and lived a life like ours, humanity and divinity have been inextricably linked. I know it’s hard to believe. The paradox of this great mystery is certainly worth considering, but on this holy night, we do not come to worship in order to ponder exactly how the Incarnation is possible. We come to worship to renew our commitment to living in the world as if it is true.

“A child has been born for us, a son given to us.”

“The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all.”

“This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

None of this means that the world is perfect. If you weren’t already convinced, 2020 should have taken care of that. If ever any year was filled with earthly muck and mire, it was this one. So much so, in fact, that

not all Christians—not even some of the most privileged Episcopalians—will be able to worship together tonight, to pass the peace, to break the bread. A year ago, we could never have imagined the number of lives that would be lost or hearts that would be broken.

Jesus doesn't guarantee that the world will be perfect, but he does supply the grace that we need in order to live like we ought to live. The author of the letter to Titus reminds us that it is this grace that teaches us how to live a life that is self-controlled, upright, and godly. Will this be a faultless life? No. A flawless life? No. A totally unspoiled life? Absolutely not! But it will be a life in which we can respond following the example of the one who appeared to us in flesh.

Because God became flesh and dwelt among us, each and every one of us, our bodies, our lives, our *selves*, are conformed to God during the good times and the bad. In the manger baby, God sanctifies all that we experience, even our suffering.

Perhaps at this point, it's best to get specific. The life that God's grace makes possible for us is not a life in which we go around blaming gay people for hurricanes or rioters for wildfires. It is not a world in which COVID-19 can simply be chalked up to God's wrath upon all those people who are different from us.

The life that God's grace makes possible for us is a life in which we, as Christians, operate from a place of compassion and love. It is a life in which we recognize the turmoil and the tragedy, the trauma, and the deep grief of the world and simply ask how we can help.

“What do you need? Where can I meet you? Stay right there. I'm on the way!” The world cries out for a response rooted in the grace of God's appearing. Not, “What did you do to deserve this?” More like, “Given these circumstances, where do we go from here? How do we walk forward together?”

That is grace in the flesh, dear friends. That is what the world needs. That is what God offers us in Jesus: the grace of gifts given, not gifts earned; grace that comes to us in our own image and inspires us to live the Christmas life. Amen.

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