

Christmas Day Meditation
2022 Titus 3:4-7

Titus 3:4-7 (New Revised Standard Version)

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Christmas day on Sunday. If it were up to me,
I'd give all of you extra credit just for showing up today.

I remember well a time when I was young,
and since Christmas Day fell on a Sunday my parents decided
that we could do our Christmas stockings early in the morning,
but then had to wait until after church to open our presents.

And what I most remember about that particular Christmas,
was how very, very, very long the worship service was that day,
and the endless delay, waiting to open our Christmas presents.

Today we are here to celebrate God's greatest gift of all.
The best gift of Christmas season that is not under the tree,
but the gift God gave us in that manger some 2000⁺ years ago,
the coming of the Messiah, the coming of God into our world.

It's about grace that we cannot earn and that we do not deserve,
but simply because God has chosen to love us, to heal and save us,
the most critical truth of God's love & grace toward us all. vs. 3

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As a teenager, after school, on Saturdays and during the summer,
I worked at National Biological Laboratory doing dissections.
My job was to prepare animal specimens and skeletons
for sale to colleges and schools for science classes.

One summer, some of the freezers at the lab that were filled
with animal carcasses, were left unplugged for several weeks,
and the contents decomposed into a greenish-brown liquid.

To say the stuff inside rotted would be a gross understatement,
and even wearing a gasmask,
there was a nasty and putrid stench beyond description.

Nothing we tried, not Lysol, bleach or combinations of chemicals
could get rid of that horrible odor of decay and death...
... and in the end, they had to replace all the freezers.

Our sin, our failures, guilt and regrets are something like that.
Despite our best efforts, our hard work and all that we do,

we cannot overcome the putrid stench of decay and death.

**For all our religious good deeds, our regrets and fervent trying,
we still can't shake the death-grip and hold of sin and guilt.
On our own, we cannot make ourselves right with God.**

But the birth of Jesus is **God's gift and Good News for sinners**,
and when we begin to believe and trust that the Good News is true,
then by faith we also begin to experience for ourselves
how much God really does love us, even just as we are.

**It will become an increasingly significant truth of our lives
that will redefine and reorient everything about how we live.**

It is not God's intention, plan or purpose for our lives
to be defined by guilt and shame, or by fear and regret,
nor for us, through good works and religious observance
to try and earn God's love or make-up for past mistakes.

Listen for how the prophet Zephaniah describes our God, vs. 3:17.

The Lord is in your midst; you shall fear no more. ... he will **rejoice over you with gladness**, he
will **renew you in his love**; he will **exult over you with loud singing**.

**Imagine our gracious and loving God singing and rejoicing over us,
with loud joy, delight and gladness celebrating that we are his,
for that is the heart and message of the Christmas story.**

Jesus, the Son of God, the true Light has come into our world,
to cleanse, to heal, to renew and to restore our human lives ...

**... and Christmas celebrates
that steadfast, infinite, inclusive and extreme grace of God--
--the Light that shines into our darkness & dreary places,
and that brings healing, hope, peace, love and joy.**

But we may have a little trouble believing or accepting all that.
The world and the people around us are often critical,
pointing out our mistakes and failures,
judging us and setting our worth by our accomplishments...
... after all, why would God be delighted or even want to sing over us?

The Christmas story raises a very pertinent question for us.
Do I really trust in God, and that God's promises are true,
or am I trying to build my life and security on my own terms?
**As Presbyterians, we say, we believe we are saved by grace alone,
but do our lives declare that God helps those who help themselves.**

We are created to be the recipients and receptacles of God's love.
We are vessels, whom God has designed for receiving & **reflecting**
love, grace, kindness and blessings back out to all the world.

God's love is not contingent upon who we are or what we do.
It is a love that is ours without our deserving or being worthy.

It is a love that claims us as God's own precious treasure.

For generations a very beautiful vase was a valued family heirloom.
The young daughter had often been warned,
"be careful because it is our family's precious treasure."

One day there was a loud crash. The little girl began to wail.
Her mother ran into the room and found her daughter crying,
and upset that the vase was broken and scattered in pieces.

She asked her daughter, "What is wrong? Did you hurt yourself?"
"I broke the family treasure", she whimpered through her tears.
Her mother held her close and said, "Yes, but you're all right."

Later in life that little girl, who grew up to be a pastor,
wrote, "I found out that day that I was the real family treasure
and that I was truly loved and precious in their sight."

The birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem is that same message.
His life, teaching and ministry **are God's supreme revelation,**
and that grace is what and who we are celebrating today.

Jesus is the full and perfect revelation and fulfilment
of God's promises in Scripture as spoken through the prophets.

The Good News of the Gospel and the message of Christmas is that
God's love and grace are not conditional or limited in any way,
but are freely given to failures, outcasts and the unworthy.

The point and meaning of Christmas is that yes, God loves you,
wants to have an authentic and growing relationship with you,
and you were created to enjoy & live with the Lord forever.

Christmas is about our God who never has – never will give up on us,
for there is always more grace and acceptance and welcome
then any of us can possibly conceive, imagine or ever use up.

The point, purpose and message of Christmas is this, John 3:16-17.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may
not perish but may have eternal life.

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, **but in order**
that the world might be saved through him.