

Christmas Eve 2021
December 24, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

As a homeowner, I've spent a fair amount of time in hardware stores, especially as we've been preparing to move. And I've noticed that particularly at the Geltzer's Hardware Store in town, the staff is always eager to help. "Can I help you find something?" they ask as you enter the store. They're glad to point you in the right direction. And on the way out, at the checkout, the question is, "Did you find everything you were looking for?"

Unless you've done your Christmas shopping online, perhaps this is a question that you've heard recently as you've been at various stores. *Did you find everything you were looking for?*

My answer at the hardware store was not always quite so certain, but in Christmas shopping, most of the time we politely answered, "Yes, thank you," or perhaps we asked about an item we were unable to find. And in the context of Christmas purchases, we probably didn't give our answer much thought beyond the immediate transaction.

But today, on this Christmas night, let us consider that question again, "Did you find what you were looking for?"

On this night we once again hear the old familiar story of an unwed teenage mother-to-be named Mary and her fiancée Joseph making the trek from Nazareth to Bethlehem under orders from the Roman officials. The birth of Mary's son happens, and we hear that a messenger from God appears to shepherds. The shepherds are the first to get the report of the birth of our Savior, and the messenger gives them a sign by which they will find the baby. The shepherds decide to go check this out, and they find things just as the angel had reported to them. *They found what they were looking for!*

We know this story, right? Even if all we know of it is from "A Charlie Brown Christmas" as Linus recites the story using King James English, we know this story. We know the shepherds found what they were looking for: the baby Messiah, the Anointed One, our Savior. What they perhaps did not know, and could not fully comprehend on that night over 2,000 years ago is what this child would mean for them, and for us.

While Luke tells us the events of Christ's birth, in essence answering the "What happened?" question, we are still left with yet another question: "Why did it happen?" Why did God choose to come to us as a little child born in a stable, and why did God choose to live as one of us?

We get part of this answer in our reading from Titus: "The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all." If we were to continue reading this letter, we would hear even more about why God came to earth: "When the goodness and lovingkindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy ... so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life."

The point here is that Jesus came to save us. Jesus came into this world precisely because we could not save ourselves from the mess of living life on our own terms. If we could have done so, we would have done it already. But human history has proved that we cannot save ourselves; we can't do it on our own. So, God took the initiative and set about this saving work, not because we earned it in any way, but solely because of God's grace and love for us all.

And this is a radical idea—especially in our culture today—a culture based on individualism, merits, success, and getting ahead. We did not and cannot earn our salvation. It is given to us freely as a gift from God simply because God loves us. Our salvation is a gift that is unmerited, undeserved, and unearned. Our salvation is given to us out of God's great love for us and for all of creation.

And the reason God gives us this gift of salvation is so that we might become heirs, children of God, with hope and anticipation for eternal life. And the beauty of eternal life is that it's not just for some far-off time when we die, but eternal life is also about right here, right now—for each and every day of our lives. Eternal life is about living fully and freely each day, loving God and loving one another. Eternal life is about a lifetime of loving presence that happens right here on earth and continues forever.

So, let us consider this question one more time, "Did you find what you were looking for?" You are here, in this church, on Christmas Eve. Think about why you came. Of course, you didn't have to come, but you chose to take time on this most special night to come and worship. Sure, there may be a family tradition of attending church, or you may be here because a parent or grandparent insisted that you come. But regardless of why you think you are here, consider what you are really seeking, because I believe there is something deeper than tradition or obligation that is our reason for gathering together tonight in worship. What are we really looking for?

I think many of us gathered here tonight are seeking meaning and purpose in the midst of our world's celebration of this Christmas holiday. During my time in seminary, I loved going to worship on Christmas morning because in the midst of all the presents, and chaos and sometimes drama, it was nice to get a little bit of perspective—to not have to worry about where we were going or what we were doing, or if our gifts for one another were good enough. Instead it was nice to get a break from all of that, and gather in worship to be reminded that on Christmas, a tiny baby was born in a manger for us and for our salvation.

Christmas is the proclamation that God loves us so much that God chose to come into this world as a helpless baby, to grow up and live with us, to die for us, and be raised from the dead to prove once and for all that our fragility, finitude, faults and failings are not the last word.

Christ comes into this world on this night to renew and redeem us, to give life to each and every one of us, with no exceptions.

No matter what your circumstances are on this night, God has called you here to speak a word of eternal life and love to you: a love that you didn't have to earn or prove yourself worthy to receive. God comes to us and God comes for us this night in the birth of Jesus Christ our Savior. God comes to us as the little baby born in the manger, and God also comes to us in the bread and the wine.

So, come, come and worship. Come to the table. Come as you are. Come here tonight and see the baby born in the manger, the child born for you, the child who gives you the gift of salvation and love. Come here tonight, and you will find what you are looking for. Thanks be to God. Amen.