

Sermon Christmas Day 2018

December 25, 2018

Grace, peace, and mercy to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Years ago when I was an RA on my dorm floor in college, I remember having a conversation with one of the resident students on my floor. This young man was someone who was relatively ethical and moral, and as we would talk about such things and things relating to the faith, he told me one day that he considered himself a “Christian Deist.” What did he mean? Well if you are familiar with Deism you know that the general idea behind it is that there is a “God.” He created the world, but after that, essentially put it into motion and now He lets it run. The idea being that the world works naturally like a clock, with its gears rolling and maintaining everything, and the Creator of that world being like a watchmaker. He just lets it go. In other words, this friend of mine thought that, yes God sent Jesus into the world to save it but other than that, He just lets it go and doesn’t care that much for what happens.

Now for us, that should be a bit shocking. You might even wonder how someone could come up with such an idea. Well, without going into too much depth, it comes from the portion of history we call the enlightenment. In this period after the Renaissance, learning and education became very important, and along with that thinking, philosophy. In this time, there were then a number of philosophers who bucked the historical faith of Christianity, and decided that we could pretty well figure this world out for ourselves; we didn’t need God. We didn’t need God to explain all the things that happen that we don’t understand. We didn’t need God to understand how the world operates, and we didn’t need God most of all to tell us how to live, or what to do. Man could tell he should just care for his fellow man and not be too mean or too rude.

Now to be fair as this happened, the ways that man should care and not be rude were pretty consistent with what the Church had said in the commandments, but this didn’t require God for these things. In other words in the midst of all of this there was a strong emphasis on a morality that we would call Judeo-Christian, but ultimately this was merely a shell of true faith. However, despite that we made many, many significant advances scientifically, technologically, and even medically during that time. With that there came an assumption that we could do all of this ourselves. In fact, we even reached the point where God became quite unnecessary. In the midst of that you

have a man like Friedrich Nietzsche saying that God is dead. From what I understand, his thought was that we have advanced so far, we can even discern that we invented this idea of God, and we don't need Him. Therefore, we have killed God, at least the idea we came up with. But even within that there was the assumption that we can master this world.

However, then there were the World Wars, and where there had been a shell which looked like Christianity, it fell down. And some began to realize we can't do it. So what do we see? A mess of despair all around us. Have your doubts? Look at the increase of things such as divorce and children being raised without both parents. Look at our rates of mental illness like depression. They have sky-rocketed. Look at the disconnect we have so much in our society.

I was talking this week to a friend who is a pastor in Seattle. We were talking about how hard things are there. He said that homelessness is a stark problem there. Why? Well maybe the abundance of shelters, the overly broad availability of aid—he thought maybe. But then it could be as much that or more something else. In Seattle there is a wide availability of free drug needles, of provision for places to shoot up. In fact he said that this has sadly become a major problem. For example, he was telling me that recently he even found needles in his yard. In the same way, his church stopped giving cards for groceries to those asking, because would give only to find empty alcohol bottles shattered behind church—and this is a nice area. But as we went on, we thought that perhaps the issue isn't one of material causes but a spiritual one. Seattle is a notoriously unchristian place. What does this come down to then? It comes down to this despair. The rug has been pulled out. As Augustine said, *“Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you. He bears about him the mark of death, the sign of his own sin, to remind him that you thwart the proud. But still, since he is a part of your creation, he wishes to praise you. The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.”* In Seattle there is not this rest for so many. And that is spreading. We're increasingly see this around us.

In light of that, for the time being we are thrashing around, and it's bad. As Christians, we see just what's happening too. As Luther would say, we see it with the eyes of faith. The world isn't seeing the problem yet, they see better comfort and opportunities for pleasure. They see still the advancement in science and technology and medicine. And are some of these things good? You bet, many things are great

blessings. But where is our wisdom? We have decided to play God since we've determined that God is dead, as Nietzsche said. At least for Nietzsche from what I understand there was a sorrow about that statement. Since then as humans we have decided to revel in our self-declared role of divinity. But as Christians we look at this with the eyes of faith and see that not every advancement is advancing us. We see that every new technology may not actually be good. For example, my understanding is that recently they had programmed two computers with some level of AI and they started own language. Fortunately the programmers shut them down before things went too far. It all shows us that maybe we're playing with fire.

And when we think of all this it's dark isn't it? To think about the world, it's pretty grim. But as Christians we have hope. Like we sing in the Christmas hymn, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," "In thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light." You see, it was just as dark when our Lord Jesus was born. There is nothing new under the sun. Herod wanted to play God when he slaughtered the innocents seeking to kill Jesus. Pilate didn't do what was right in not freeing Jesus. Or even before, Pharaoh wanted to play God when he imprisoned the Israelites. Even Joseph's brothers showed their capacity for evil in selling him into slavery. Yes this darkness was the case for the world since the fall into sin.

And yet there He was the Christ-child. The Light, laid in a manger. The Savior, the light shining in the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome it, as we heard in John. That was this child. Or think about it in light of the words from our Epistle lesson. We see there that everything had been working up to this. God had been speaking. Listen to those words from Hebrews: **"Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power."** Do you hear it there? God had been revealing Himself to the people, to the Fathers; to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob. He had spoken to Moses, He had spoken to Elijah. He had revealed His Kingship in David and Solomon. In many and various ways. There had been visions, burning bushes, dreams, calling from slumber, and it had all come to this moment. It had all come down to this moment where now He spoke through this Son.

And what did He say there? Love. Love in the midst of hate for fellow man and hate even for Him as the true God. Light, light in the midst of this self-coronation to

divinity and the darkness that comes with it. Light that no darkness can overcome. What did He say there? He looked upon this child and His angels sang with His glory in the highest, sang of His peace to His people on earth. And He saw not only that child but the whole life ahead of this Jesus. The life lived perfectly under the Law, the life willingly sacrificed for these broken sinners, the life of this light. He saw this and declared that this life would be the radiance of His own glory. The Light of His own light from this very God of very God. His own imprint, mark left in this world. And He spoke all of this in the resurrection when this Jesus was crucified for the sins of the world.

And now He wants you to hear what Jesus says. He doesn't want you to find it in the wisdom of your own brains, or the emotions of your own hearts, He wants you to hear it from His Scriptures, from the preaching of those whom He has called to proclaim His Word. He wants you to hear it unequivocally: "for the sake of my Son Jesus Christ born at the first Christmas, I forgive you all of your sin." "I have baptized you and washed you of it, I have fed you with that very body born in the manger—the body that was crucified, died, and was buried, and that has now ascended into heaven—fed that you would know that it is for you, for YOUR forgiveness. Fed with that so you would know that this darkness all around you has been overcome."

What a comfort for us. There is all this darkness and yet we have light. He has given us that light. All the more, as we look at this history manifesting itself around us, we can know that we don't have to delude ourselves into thinking that we can even approach being God, and that's a good thing for us not to. We can know that even when there is merely a shell of the faith around us, we have the true filling by His Holy Spirit. We can know that when we are tempted to think that He's just set everything in motion, it's much more than that.

With the birth of this child, He really is working in everything. He is confirming His creation by its redemption and the promise of a new creation for us. He even says as much when He speaks of this little child upholding the universe by the Word of His Power. And we can know it because this child is the Word made flesh who dwelt among us.

As we celebrate Christmas then, that is the joy. God has seen our wretched estate and not only entered into it, not only suffered in it with us, but suffered in it for us to free us in that light of His birth and resurrection. The very Word of our Lord confirm you and comfort you always in that light, until the day where you stand in that light, face to face with Him eternally. Amen.