

Christmas Eve
December 24, 2004
Titus 2:11-14

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

First Meditation: The Reason for the Reason for the Season—What is it?

I can guess what some of you were thinking as you sat down tonight and began to read the service folder. “Everything looks good, except there’s a typo in the title of the service. It’s supposed to say, ‘The Reason for the Season,’ but it says, ‘The Reason for the Reason for the Season.’ I guess his computer didn’t make the little green, squiggly line under that to tell him that he was repeating some words.” But it’s not a mistake. “The Reason for the Season”—we hear that every year. It’s a reminder to remember what the reason for this season is. It’s Jesus. Jesus is the reason for the season. But what’s the reason for Jesus? What I mean is, what prompted God to send his only Son into the world? What moved Jesus to humble himself to be an embryo, to be confined in the womb of Mary, to be born and laid in a manger? What moved Jesus to take on human flesh and blood, knowing that the very same flesh would one day be pierced with nails, that the blood would be shed? Jesus is the reason for the season. But what reason lies behind Jesus and his coming?

We find the answer in a part of a letter written by Paul the Apostle. For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. There’s the answer: grace. Grace is the reason for the reason for the season.

What’s grace? Grace is someone giving a gift, even when the person they’re giving it to doesn’t deserve it. Grace is forgiving a debt instead of making someone pay. Grace is someone giving an extravagant gift just because he or she wants to. Grace is the attitude behind all these things. Grace is seen most clearly in God, who gives and forgives and gifts extravagantly, just because he wants to, just because he loves people. Grace is God’s favor, shown to us.

Jesus is the reason for the season. Grace is what moved Jesus to come. Tonight, let’s see three things:

How grace affects the way we view the past, specifically the first Christmas;

How grace affects the way we live in the present;

How grace affects the way we look toward the future.

Second Meditation: The Reason for the Reason for the Season—How does it change the way we view the past?

A few years ago, September 11 was just another date on the calendar. Maybe it was someone's birthday or anniversary, but nothing more.

Things are different now. Why is "September 11" not just another date anymore? Because something happened then that has changed the course of our nation in a radical way.

Why is the first Christmas, the night Jesus was born, not just another date?

Because something happened then that changed the course of human history in a radical way. When Christ was born, grace was showing itself in a new way. God's love manifested itself in a way that it hadn't before. God's commitment to love a human race that didn't love him—that commitment took on a new face when Jesus was born. God had sent his only Son into the world, that whoever believes in him should not perish forever, but have eternal life. The first Christmas is a real event. More than that, it's an event that changed everything before it and after it.

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men... our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us... That's what makes Christmas special: grace. Tonight we celebrate the fact that God loves people who don't deserve to be loved. And more than that—we celebrate that God's love for us is more than just a feeling. We celebrate the fact that God took action. We celebrate the beginning of the life of Jesus because we know how that life ended: him giving himself into death for us. We celebrate because we know that the body that grew in the womb of Mary and lay in the manger of Bethlehem arose to life after it had died on Calvary. We celebrate because these things that really happened in the past give us life in the present and the future.

The reason for the reason for the season is grace. Grace transforms the past from a collection of quaint stories into the factual history of God taking action in this world, taking action to save people like you and me.

Third Meditation: The Reason for the Reason for the Season—How does it change the way we live in the present?

Anthony was not expecting a gift from Grandma this year. Normally he would have; she gave gifts to everybody. When the grandkids got to be teenagers, she would give them a card with money, which they loved. “You kids can get what you want. I can’t keep up with all the new stuff there is,” she’d say.

But this year at Thanksgiving—actually a couple days after—Anthony had had a few friends over. Grandma had been staying with them for the long Thanksgiving weekend. Anthony and his friends were playing Playstation, talking and laughing. Then they started joking about “old people.” And Grandma, who Anthony thought was taking a nap, walked in and heard them—heard him. She went back home a day earlier than she had planned. “I... I don’t feel well,” she said. But Anthony knew it was his fault.

She came back at Christmas though. Anthony expected the cold shoulder from her. He knew he deserved it. When they exchanged presents after church on Christmas Eve, Grandma began handing out her cards to his brothers and sisters. All the grandkids got a present, except Anthony.

He went on with the evening as if he didn’t notice and as if he didn’t care. Later, he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned to see his grandma, who led him into the kitchen. She looked at him and said, “This is for you,” and held out a card with his name on it. “Open it,” she said. Inside he found a card and a \$100 dollar bill. While he was still looking at it in amazement, his grandma grabbed him and hugged him, squishing the card. “I love you,” she said in his ear.

“I love you too. Grandma, I’m sorry,” he said. Not just because it was the right thing to say. But because... how can you not love someone who shows such... grace?

Gifts can be transformational. And not just gifts, but the grace that moves people to give them to us. When we encounter grace, it changes the way we think about the person who’s displaying it. Grace changes us. Consequently, it changes how we live.

God gave his only Son to us, who don’t deserve any good gifts from him. (But he gifts us anyway; that’s grace, right?) God gave his only Son for us, to rescue us from the penalty we earned for our sins, to rescue us from a fruitless, self-centered life. When we know and believe that God gave us such a gift, we are transformed. The gift of God and the grace behind it transforms the way we live. Paul says, It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age. He continues: Jesus Christ... 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.

God’s grace transforms us. God’s love—which comes to us even though we don’t deserve it—makes us new people. As new people, we view God differently. Now, instead of wanting to indulge every desire we have, we want to do what God desires. “The love of Christ compels us... He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised again.”

What does grace do for us in the present? It changes the way we live. Well, it's deeper than that really. God's love centered in Jesus Christ gives us a new life, a life we live for him. Grace transforms us.

Fourth Meditation: The Reason for the Reason for the Season—How does it change the way we look toward the future?

I have a favorite baseball team. I hope they do well next year. They've got the talent to win it all. But since the last time they won the World Series was 1908, my optimism for the future is somewhat guarded.

The past and the present affect the way we look toward the future.

What can we expect from God, based on his track record? We can expect him to keep his promises. We can expect him to do that in a way that we weren't expecting—oh, we know what to expect, but God seems to do things in surprising ways. (Who expected a teenage mother, a Roman census, a full inn and a feeding trough?) We can expect to wait; God keeps his promises based on his plans and schedule, not based on our timetables and demands. We can expect the waiting to be hard; waiting always is. But we can expect not to be disappointed. We can expect God to make good on his word, even though it costs him dearly. We can expect Jesus to come to earth again. But this time it will not be humbly as at Bethlehem. This time he will be revealed as who he is: the most powerful ruler there is. "Not as of old, a little child to bear and fight and die, but crowned in glory like the sun that lights the morning sky."

The Bible has a word for this sort of expectation. It's a word we know, but when it's connected to God and to him giving his word, it takes on a whole new meaning. The word: hope. Paul writes, We wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

God made a promise: Jesus will come. And he did. God makes promises: I promise to come to you, forgive you and give you new life. And he does. God promises: Jesus will come again to make all things new. And he will. God loves us enough to make us promises and then keep them. That love brightens the future.

Jesus is the reason for the season. The reason for the reason for the season — what moved the Father to send his Son—is the grace of God.

Grace showed itself when our Lord was born. On that night in the past, grace changed everything, our present and future included.

Grace makes us who we are today: we are a people belonging to God, loved and adopted by him, moved from the inside out to live in a way that loves him back. Grace illumines a future that can seem joyless and terrifying. The promises that God, moved by his grace, has made, bring light to darkness. Grace illumines the future with hope.