

First Sunday After Epiphany
January 13, 2013
Amazing Grace Lutheran Church – Pastor Chip Wilke

Titus 3:4-7

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. (NIV)

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3). This is the gospel in a nutshell. I could say “Amen” right now and end the sermon. Perhaps some of you might rejoice and say it’s about time Pastor wraps a sermon up quickly, makes his point, and says “Amen.” But for me to say “Amen” right now, I would be doing you an injustice. For in these words before us, Paul also beautifully sums up the heart of the gospel in one sentence in this letter to Titus, a fellow minister of the gospel. What a blessing it is to take a deeper look into this good news. He reveals further the love and kindness of God our Savior. Consider with me today the awesome truth that: **God’s kindness & love appeared in Christ to save us!** Paul answers three questions for us in regards to this astounding truth. **Why? How? What is the result?**

In love and kindness God sent His Son to save us. At Jesus’ baptism we are reminded that Jesus appeared as the Son of God and the Christ. God sent His Son as the Messiah, and anointed Jesus to do His will all the way to His suffering and death on the cross. Paul writes in these verses: God saved us. It is an accomplished fact. This is the message of salvation. Jesus has done it all for us. Whoever believes - that is - puts their trust in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, has eternal life.

Why did God do such a thing? First of all, Paul tells us what is not the reason for our salvation; ***“Not because of the righteous things we have done.”*** In the original language these words are placed first in the word order for an added emphasis and would read something like: ***“Not because of the works which we, we have done in righteousness, but on account of his mercy he saved us.”*** While it is important to God that our faith expresses itself in love as good works flow as fruits of our faith as Christians, Paul wants to make it perfectly clear to us that our works play no part in our salvation. No amount of works can save us.

Instead, Paul says ***“but because of his mercy he saved us.”*** We have already mentioned God’s kindness and love as the reason God saved us. Another and perhaps more familiar word we often use when talking about what God did for us is grace. Grace is a totally undeserved love or unmerited gift from God. Now, the word mercy is used as the reason why God saved us. It looks at that love of God from a different angle. While grace sees God loving us for no reason in us, mercy sees God as loving us for a very big and important reason in us. Yes, we have to give God a reason for his mercy. Before you jump all over me and say: *“you just said that anything we do plays no part in our salvation”*, I want you to understand this word mercy. You and I do not have the least

difficulty in causing this special love of God called mercy. All God has to do is look at us and we provoke in Him this special love.

Let me give you an example. One time I was on the interstate when all of a sudden traffic slowed. After several minutes I saw the reason as I looked and saw this dog. This dog looked like it had been on the run for some time and could use a good meal. This dog looked scared and lost. Worst of all, the dog was injured. It must of been hit as it scampered off to the side of the road limping along. When I saw it my heart sunk and I think I even said out loud – ahhhhhh! My heart went out to it. That’s mercy. It’s compassion, a pity, for someone or something in great need.

Can we provoke this feeling of mercy in the heart of God? Even before we thought of it or asked for it! Could anyone be more pitiful, more wretched, more miserable than us? God looks at us as we are from head to toe, in soul and body, and He sees death. He sees a people lost in sin, blindness, darkness and despair. He sees a people powerless, captive to the devil, a people tossed to and fro by this lust and that craving, a people absolutely worthless. Luther, in his unique way of putting things, says we are nothing but a sack of maggots. So mercy is an attitude in the heart of God that we have caused, caused not by our goodness but our wretchedness, caused not by our beauty but our ugliness, caused not by what we have to offer him but by the absolute and total need of souls and bodies that have wrath written all over them.

So this is God’s response to our wretchedness and misery - mercy. On account of this mercy God saved us. He is moved to act for us. He sends His Son – the Son that stood in line with sinners waiting for John to baptize Him because He came as our substitute. If we ever doubt that God is merciful look back into that manger at Bethlehem! If we ever think for a second that God would not have mercy on us we need to fix our eyes once again on the cross. God sends His Son to suffer & die for our sins. Why? Paul makes it clear: ***“not because of the righteous things we have done, but because of his mercy.”***

Paul immediately answers the question: how? How do these great gifts of God become ours? How does God change our wretched state? Paul writes: ***“he saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.”*** How does the Father give us individually the salvation He prepared for all the world of sinners through Christ? He saved us by means of a washing. This is a clear referral to baptism - to the same new birth through water and the Spirit Jesus spoke about to Nicodemus. This is the baptism Peter speaks of when he says: ***“Be baptized and wash your sins away” (Acts 22)***. This is the baptism that Paul writes about when he encourages husbands to love their wives ***“just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word”(Ephesians 5)***.

This washing does two things. It is described as washing of rebirth and renewal. Our children need to be washed not just because they get dirty playing – they need to be washed because they are covered in sin. They are covered in the sin we as parents passed onto them. We too like our children need to have our sins washed away. We need to be renewed or made new. This is what Baptism does for us all. God washes us. We are clothed in Christ and all our sins are washed away. Our baptisms give us the power every day to live as His children. In baptism we are born again. The Holy Spirit gives us a new spiritual life. Each year we celebrate our birthday’s, but this birth, this rebirth, is worthy

of a greater celebration. In baptism, God saves us. In baptism, God gives us the Holy Spirit ***“whom he pours out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.”***

Now, what is the result? ***“So that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.”*** God has justified us. When you hear the words justified or justification think of a court room setting. We are in God’s court, the verdict comes in, and we are acquitted. God’s “not guilty” verdict was announced loud and clear when Jesus came out of the grave after suffering and dying to pay the price of our sins. Have you ever witnessed the pure joy on the face of a person acquitted in court? They usually turn into the arms of family members and rejoice. They are free. Now think about how much greater is our joy. We are free – from sin, from Satan – from death and hell. For we are: ***“justified by his grace.”*** The result of this grace is that we are heirs having the hope of eternal life. The result is we are heirs of an inheritance greater than we can ever imagine - an inheritance that will never ***“perish, spoil or fade kept for us in heaven” (1 Peter 1)***. This is the result of God’s goodness, mercy, and grace which we will enjoy forever.

I pray the baptism of Jesus today opens our eyes to see the Christ, the Anointed One of God. I pray it is a reminder of what our baptism does for us. I pray we are eager to listen to His Word where the beautiful Gospel is revealed in different ways. Most of all I pray we see the kindness and love of God that appeared in Jesus to save us. What a wonderful gospel message: ***“But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us (why?), not because of the righteous things we have done, but because of his mercy. (how?) He saved us through a washing of rebirth and a renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, (what is the result?) so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.”*** I pray you will rejoice even more as now I am ready to say: Amen!