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Titus 3:4-7

THE KINDNESS AND LOVE OF GOD OUR SAVIOR HAVE APPEARED

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A blessed Christmas to all of you! As Andy Williams would sing, "It's the most wonderful time of the year!" It's not for the reasons that most people think. To most people Christmas is a day of anticipation and joy. The children get up early and run to the tree. They find their presents neatly wrapped but not for long. They can't wait to open them and to play with them. Mom and Dad put on a fresh pot of coffee and sit watching their children. There are probably more relatives involved in the day. Someone is coming and someone is going. Perhaps the places change every year, but the people remain the same. Maybe it's time for some music: "Jingle Bells, Walking in a Winter Wonderland, Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire" and more.

I am in favor of doing all those things, but I think that one thing is missing. So many people have so much to do that they don't make it to church for Christmas morning. Christmas morning is one of those services that has fallen out of favor with many people and even many congregations. People just don't go. Some make a choice between Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Some go to neither. That is a shame. Each of them has different emphases. Christmas Eve is a time to focus on the nativity. We go to Bethlehem and see the manger, the mother, the angels and the shepherds. We focus on St. Luke's Gospel. Christmas Day is a time to focus on the incarnation. God has become man. We reel in awe at this astounding miracle. We focus on St. John's Gospel. The Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us. The Christmas story is a time to reflect, to ponder, to treasure all these things in our hearts. Everything else will get done. This is a special time. St. Paul tells us that THE KINDNESS AND LOVE OF GOD OUR SAVIOR HAVE APPEARED.

"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." This is what the Christmas story is all about. He will be called Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. Christmas really has nothing to do with trees or tinsel, Santa or shopping, decorations, snow, jingle bells, reindeer (red-nosed or otherwise), poinsettias, egg nog, wreaths or any other outward trappings. It has to do with a Savior from sin. It has to do with the kindness and love of God.

Christmas is not something that we make happen, no matter how elaborate our preparations may be. No matter how hard we may try to change things in this lousy, sinful world we live in, no matter how hard we try to change our own behavior, no matter how hard we may try to stop being naughty but nice, we can and never will live up to the standard that God holds us to, a standard of absolute perfection. We can have no sin in us and we must possess the righteousness, the perfection that God's Law demands. That is not going to put us in a festive mood.

Christmas is not about me finally being able to do what God demands. Christmas is about me receiving God's gift of a Savior who would do what I was unable to do and would undo what my sins had done. God saved us not because of righteous things that we had done, but because of his mercy. Christmas is all God's doing. We could not do a thing. God does not come because the human race finally saw our problem, asked for God's help, cleaned up our act and confessed our sins. No, he came because he saw the utter helplessness of our lives. We are powerless to change and that would lead to pain and ultimately death.

In fact, our own preparations only cloud things up and muddy the waters. We ignore the most important Gift. The familiar carol says, "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given." Someone once said that there are three

classes of people: those who make things happen, those who watch things happen and those who sit around and wonder what happened. When it comes to Christmas, none of us are in that first category. We don't make Christmas happen. Only God did that. We can only sit and watch. We can only be spectators as we see the Virgin Mary and Joseph travelling from Nazareth to Bethlehem, fulfilling the census decree of Caesar Augustus and God's prophecy. We can only sit and watch as we see them turned away from the inn and forced to have their child in a stable. We can marvel at the angels' appearance to the shepherds in the field and their beautiful message of great joy to all people. We did nothing to bring it about. We can only sit wide-eyed as we see that child grow into manhood, live the perfect life of love that we could not, take our sins upon himself and go to the cross and pay our debt.

Yet if we are really truthful, we have to admit that we fall into the third category. We wonder what happened and we would still be wondering if God himself had not told us. By nature, we are spiritually blind to truth, dead in our sins and enemies of God. I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing, believe in Jesus Christ or come to him. The Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts to believe the Christmas Gospel, the good tidings of great joy for all people. Yes, even in regard to our own faith, there is nothing we can do. God gets all the credit.

He once again does it in his own way. Everything about Christmas seems so strange to our eyes and ears. Mary and Joseph just looked like ordinary people. The Son of God is born in a stable and lies in a feeding trough for animals. There were no doctors and nurses to assist with his birth. His birth is not announced to the wealthy and influential, to kings and princes, but rather to everyday smelly shepherds who were out looking after their flocks at night.

And so too, God is going to use water, the most common substance on earth to bring us into this new heavenly kingdom. The birth of our king is going to be connected to your second birth. You are going to be born again through the washing of water and the Word. "He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, who 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." It is something that has happened. It is something that God made happen. You did nothing. In most cases, you didn't ask for it. You weren't even ready for it. You didn't have the time or the inclination to give your heart a thorough cleansing. It was littered with the filth of sin, but God came to you anyway. God knew what you needed. God knew that you were helpless to do anything about it. He came to make the changes that you could never make yourself. He came to bring sight to the blind. He came to give life to the dead. He came to change you from his enemy to his friend. He came to make you his child and to give you an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. He adopted you into his very family through baptism.

Yes, the kindness and love of God our Savior have appeared. God has put us on his Christmas gift list, not because of any righteous things we have done, but because of his mercy. He does not treat us as our sins deserve. God is love. God certainly could have left his fallen creation to its own sad fate. God's love for you moved him to not only send his Son, but to sacrifice his Son. We can never forget that behind the cradle is the cross. He came to die, and he came to die for you. This is a gift that is personal. This is a gift that lasts a lifetime and beyond.

Yes, you are heirs, having the hope of eternal life. We think of what Jesus gave up to come into this world of sin. He gave up all the glories of heaven to become a servant. He became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. He would die the painful and shameful death for you. He stayed on the cross until every last sin was paid for in full. And then he rose from the dead, exactly as he and the Scriptures had promised. He ascended into heaven and resumed his position as King of kings and Lord of lords.

Everything that Jesus possesses is yours! You are his heir. You will receive his blessings when you take your last earthly breath. A world with no more sickness, pain and death. A world where we will live forever with perfect,

glorified bodies. A world where we will be reunited with all the saints who have gone before us. A world where we will be with Christ forever. That is what we have. We are heirs of eternal life.

As we go through this life, we deal with heartaches and sorrows. Many of us feel pain at the loss of loved ones. We feel the pain of others who are suffering. We deal with bodies that wear out and financial hardships and broken relationships that we can't fix. We yearn for something better. Rejoice! We are heirs of eternal life.

You did nothing to earn this inheritance. It comes to you from the kindness and love of God. He named you as his heir of inexhaustible riches. Your chances of going to heaven are 100% because it does not depend upon you in the least. Christ our Savior did it all.

One of the most beautiful and meaningful Christmas cards I ever saw was a picture of a garbage dump full of broken glass, broken toys, spoiled food and all kinds of other garbage. And there in the middle of it all was a beautiful rose. Isn't that exactly what God did at Christmas? In a world of broken hearts, shattered dreams, guilty consciences and feelings of worthlessness, God sent his Son like a rose in a garbage dump. Isn't that exactly what God has done for us individually in baptism? "Lo, how a rose e'er blooming from tender stem hath sprung! Of Jesse's lineage coming as men of old have sung. It came a floweret bright amid the cold of winter when half-spent was the night. This Flower whose fragrance tender with sweetness fills the air dispels with glorious splendor the darkness everywhere. True Man, yet very God, from sin and death he saves us and lightens every load."

"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." Have a blessed Christmas! AMEN.