

Christmas Day
 December 25, 2009
 Ex. 40:17-21, 34-38; Titus 3:4-7; John 1:1-18

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

He [Jesus] came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

You probably have noticed the many greeting cards, bumper stickers, and commercials that say, "Remember the reason for the season." The intent of this slogan is to remind people of the Christ in Christmas. Well, it is true enough that Advent and Christmas belong to the Church Calendar. Yet, is asking a dead unbelieving world to remember the reason for this season really that fruitful? Before we ponder that question, let's first ponder it for ourselves. Have we spent more time remembering with thanksgiving the birth of Jesus than we have searching for the best deals on Christmas presents? I would guess that most of us have spent more time participating in the "commercialization" of Christmas, like Charlie Brown's friends, than we have remembering and studying God's Word, which proclaims the Christ of Christmas. If you think that you have remembered well enough the reason for the season by saying, "Merry Christmas" and the like -- and think you are better than those who say, "Happy Holidays." -- you may want to reevaluate.

Remembering the reason for the season saves no one. You can remember that the birth of Jesus is the reason for Christmas -- you can even remember and have head knowledge of the reasons for the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, and Trinity --yet, head knowledge of the entire Bible saves no one. Even the demons know and remember the reason for the seasons. Many people remember the reason for Christmas, but are on the happy road to hell.

The same is true for us if we think it is our remembering of Christmas that gets us to heaven. If we think that God shows us more favor because we say, "Merry Christmas" and not, "Happy Holidays" then we are living like a Pharisee. If we think that because we come to Church on Easter and Christmas and remember the reason for the seasons that we are going to heaven, we are mistaken. More than that! If you think because your family has been Lutheran since the time of Martin Luther -- or if you think that because you have been Lutheran your whole life -- made it through confirmation - come to Church every week -- give 10% of your money back to God -- that that gives you the right to become a child of God -- you are Jacob Marley and are dead as a doornail.

Our Gospel lesson says that, "**Jesus came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.**" The Pharisees thought that they were children of God because they were of the blood line of Abraham. They were just like those who think that they are a child of God because they were raised in the church. God says no to this sense of entitlement. You are not born into God's family by blood line or by claiming a solid Lutheran family heritage.

So, you are not born a child of God by blood. Nor are you born into God's family **by the will of the flesh or the will of man.** The Pharisees thought that because they lived squeaky clean outwardly moral lives that God clapped for their effort from heaven. They thought because they remembered the Passover and other reasons for church seasons that they were in God's

Kingdom. They were wrong. They were churchgoing religious people, but they had no faith inside of their rock hard hearts. We are delusional Pharisees also if we think by coming to church and going through the motions by singing the liturgy and remembering all that Christ has done that we will go to heaven. You can confess with your mouth The Creed or Lord's Prayer until you are blue in the face, but if you don't believe in His name - you sit in darkness. **"Jesus came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."**

So, it isn't your blood line, your remembering, or your efforts that birth you into God's family, but faith. You must believe in Jesus' name. The faith of your faithful Lutheran grandparents or parents won't save you. Each person must believe. This is why we say, "I believe" in the creeds. Faith has always been the answer to the question of, "How am I brought into God's family?" This was true in the O.T. and is still true today. Abraham believed and it was credited to Him as righteousness. Or as it says in Mark 16, **"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."** So, if everyone must believe and be baptized to be saved, what is this faith all about?

Faith isn't remembering the reasons for the seasons. It is more than going through a mental checklist of facts about the Christ of Christmas. As we already said, demons can do that. Saving faith actually holds on to and trusts in the promised Savior for oneself. Additionally, if faith is just a rational mental process of check marking a bunch of fundamental facts, then can infants have faith? When our little sinners are born into this fallen world, should we frantically try to get them to say and understand, "Merry Christmas?" Or, what about when you are sleeping or are knocked unconscious or in a comma? Do you have faith then? Do you have faith when your mind fails you in old age and you can't remember the reason for the seasons? Thankfully, faith is more than some adult rational assent to knowledge.

So, how does one get this faith that births you into God's family? Many in American religion say that you can make a righteous decision of the will to believe in Jesus' name and be born again. Scripture says, no. **But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."** What role did we play in our first birth? Did we decide to be born? Nope. The same is true for our second birth. **But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.**

The Holy Spirit working in the Word of God with ordinary water in Holy Baptism is what creates faith and births you into God's family. In Baptism you are born of God and your rock hard heart smashed to pieces. God does it all. Baptism isn't about you remembering, but about God remembering you. The same is true of Christmas. Christmas is about God remembering His promise to save the world from sin, death, and the power of the devil. He kept good on His promise. Christ was born for Jews and Gentiles, i.e. the whole world. During Jesus' entire life He had perfect faith, perfect remembrance, and perfect thankfulness toward the Father. He also had sinless selfless love toward His neighbor in our place. Jesus is our righteousness. Yet, righteous Jesus went to the cross to receive the wrath of God for our sin and the sin of the

world. While we were sinners and remembered Him not, God remembered us and Christ died for us.

People can remember Christmas, but the benefit of Christ's life, death, and resurrection are given to you in Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, and Holy Communion. We all probably know people who become defensive when we mention that they don't go to Church often and are breaking the Third Commandment. They usually say, "Don't judge me you don't know my heart. I am a believer. I have faith." These poor souls have been misled by a wrong definition of faith. If faith is just remembering the reason for the season or what you learned in Catechesis, you can do that just fine from home in your bed. But true faith is created and nurtured by the gifts God gives. The Holy Spirit, working in the Word of God given to you in Holy Baptism, continues to strengthen your faith through Holy Absolution, Preaching, and Holy Communion. You can remember God at a football game or basketball practice, but He remembers you in the Divine Service. It is here that He forgives you all your sins in words, water, bread, and wine -- and keeps you believing from cradle to grave.

Christians, it is good to remember the reason for the season. It is good to remember that all of your sins are washed away in your Baptism. It is good to remember and proclaim the Lord's Death until He comes again during Holy Communion. But let's remember that it is not our remembering or what we do that saves us. It is Christ's doing and remembering us that save us, even when we don't remember Him as we should. Christ remembered to come and save us from our sins by His life, death, and resurrection. He remembers to come to us graciously in the Divine Service gifting us with what He won on the cross. Since we are connected to Him through the faith He creates and sustains via His Word and Sacraments, He will certainly remember to deal graciously with us when He advents on the Last Day. Having the righteousness of Christ through faith, which alone avails before Holy God, I say to you, Merry Christmas or Happy Holydays. Amen.