

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours this 5<sup>th</sup> Day of Christmas, in the name of Christ our Saviour. Amen. The title of the sermon today is "Paul's one-sentence Christmas", by Rev. Paul Scaer, based on the Epistle, Galatians chapter 4. Let us pray... . Amen.

Today is the first Sunday after Christmas, yet it is no time to move on. The Feast of Stephen was on December 26<sup>th</sup> which continues the Christmas celebration, and the Feast of the Holy Innocents on December 28<sup>th</sup> tempers it, but this is a day to dwell on the miracle God hath created: the incarnation of Christ to restored our human nature.

As such, I have a couple of Christmas wishes. First, I have to admit, sometimes I wish our Lord had talked more about justification by faith. And second, I wish Paul had written more about Jesus. And not just the fact that Jesus lived, died, and rose again. If there's room for Moses and the manna, why not the feeding of the five thousand? And if the parting of the Red Sea makes the cut, why not our Lord walking on the water? For that matter, we might ask, why doesn't Paul give us a little Christmas?

Perhaps, we should chalk it up to humility, proper to an apostle who wasn't an eyewitness to our Lord's ministry. Or maybe Paul understood inherent limitations. How, after all, could he compete with Luke's shepherds, angels, swaddling clothes?

WHAT PAUL HAS TO SAY ABOUT CHRISTMAS,  
HE SAYS IN ONE SENTENCE:

**"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons"** (vv 4–5).

I.

There you have it: the nativity without bells and tinsel. Paul would have us know that Christmas is more than a feeling. For Paul, Christmas is the incarnation and the virgin birth. It's redemption, atonement, and vicarious satisfaction, all resulting in your own inclusion into God's family. Sure, like a lot of Lutheranism, Paul's a bit heavy on the doctrine. But, I suspect Paul had his reasons.

Now, of course, the critics claim that Paul never heard of the Bethlehem Babe.

But hear again Paul's words to the Galatians along with Luke's nativity account: **"But when the fullness of time had come"** (Gal 4:4). **"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus. . . . And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth"** (Lk 2:1, 6).

**"God sent his Son"** (Gal 4:4). **"The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin. . . . And he came to her and said . . . 'He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High'"** (Lk 1:26–27, 28, 32).

**"Born of woman"** (Gal 4:4). **"And the angel said to her . . . 'You will conceive in your womb and bear a son.' . . . And Mary said to the angel, 'How will this be, since I am a virgin?' And the angel answered her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you'"** (Lk 1:30, 31, 34–35).

**"Born under the law"** (Gal 4:4). **"She wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn"** (Lk 2:7). **"To redeem those under the law"** (Gal 4:5). **"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people"** (Lk 1:68). **"Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born**

**this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord"** (Lk 2:10–11). **"That we might receive adoption as sons"** (Gal 4:5).

**"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!'"** (Lk 2:13–14).

## II.

Who knows? Given the beauty of Luke and the drama of Matthew, maybe the early Christians staged Christmas pageants, just like we do. If they did, what part might Paul have played? Being a tough guy, could Paul have imagined himself as Joseph, the guardian and protector of the little Holy Family? As a scholar, would Paul have fancied himself a Wise Man? Or, given Paul's own dramatic conversion, perhaps he'd be a shepherd surprised by the heavenly host. On second thought, it's hard to think of Paul as a poor and lowly anything, much less a shepherd. And unlike the Wise Men, Paul didn't go out of his way to worship Jesus. It was our Lord who found Paul while Paul was walking in the wrong direction. And, unlike Joseph, Paul did nothing to protect Jesus. Instead, Paul did quite the opposite.

Deep down, Paul must have known the role he was born to play. When he heard the news of Jesus, Herod was disturbed, and all of Jerusalem with him. And when Paul heard the news of Jesus, he, too, was disturbed. Herod responded by orchestrating the deaths of perhaps dozens of little boys. Paul responded by breathing murderous threats against all the churches.

Now, we really don't know much about early Christmas pageants, but we do know Paul actually staged a little Passion play of his own. Back then, his stage name was Saul and his co-star was named Stephen. In the first act, Stephen preaches the Gospel, while Saul incites the teeth-gnashing mob. In the second act, Paul beams with pride as Stephen is dragged out of the city. Finally, in the third act, Paul holds the coats, so others can throw stones. And Stephen, according to script, can be heard praying, **"Do not hold this sin against them"** (Acts 7:60).

No, Saul didn't get the chance to snuff out the life of Mary's Child, but he did the next best thing. Stones thrown at Stephen were aimed at Christ. How would you like that on your conscience? Do you ever wonder what it would be like to be Paul? How often have you woken up in a cold sweat thinking about what you've done?

So, what do you think Paul saw when he looked at the nativity? Paul saw an innocent baby, who would die an innocent man. Paul saw the face of Stephen. Paul saw the face of Jesus, and heard Him say, over and over again, **"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"** (Acts 9:4).

For Paul the sinner, Christmas had to be more than a precious moment or a Hallmark holiday. Santa's a lot of fun, but when you've got blood on your hands, the question of who's been naughty or nice doesn't begin to get at the problem.

A real sinner needs more. More than the world has to offer. More even than so much of what the Church offers. Paul the sinner needed more than Christ as a heartwarming example of how to live a good life. It was much too late for that. Paul the sinner needed more than Christus Victor, that Christ was victorious over the powers of evil and the devil. After all, Paul had been the oppressor, not the oppressed. What Paul needed was the dawn of redeeming grace. Paul didn't need a theory of the atonement. Paul needed the atonement. Paul needed one born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law.

Did you notice? When you went to the Christmas Eve service, didn't you see a few women clutching tissues? It goes with the territory. Candlelight songs bring back memories of loved ones who have passed away or are far away. The songs of children can take you back to when your own children were little, or even back to when you sang in the children's choir. So it is, along with the eggnog, Christmas serves a generous helping of nostalgia, sad and sweet.

But the nostalgia is made still sadder when garnished with maror, the bitter herb of memories we'd just as soon pass over. When we think of what once was, we are reminded of the times we have harmed others, acted selfishly, and made matters worse. Thinking of what might be, we are reminded that our own little world is a mess, because we made it that way. And there's no one else to blame. And as we reflect, perhaps we'll conclude that it hasn't been such a "Wonderful Life" after all.

What to do? When confronted with the ghosts of our past, we might choose the path of Scrooge and vow to amend our sinful lives. But what if you're too late? Scrooge was relieved to find Tiny Tim still alive. Stephen, though, was dead, and Paul's nightmare was his life. And there was nothing he could do about it.

### III.

It's the kind of thing that can bring a grown man to tears. It's David crying out, "**For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned**" (Ps 51:3-4). It's Peter, hearing the cock crow for a second time and then breaking down in bitter tears at his repeated denial.

It's the Paul in each of us. The Lord I think so little of; the Lord I shove out of my way; yes, that Lord Jesus came into the world. Not in power, but in the weakness of a child. Not to demand payback, but to make the payment for my sin. Not to breathe murderous threats, but to bring peace on earth, goodwill toward men.

Hear, then, the shofar of the prophets and the trumpet of saints. "Come to Bethlehem and see Him whose birth the angels sing" (LSB 368:3). Cry for sorrow, but then weep for joy. Receive with Paul the gift of innocence.

*"What child is this, who, laid to rest, On Mary's lap is sleeping?"* (LSB 370:1). The one born of a woman, born under the law, that He might redeem those under the law. *"Nails, spear shall pierce Him through, The cross be borne for me, for you"* (LSB 370:2).

And that is good news. And since it is, and since I started the sermon with two wishes, I'd like to end with a third. And along with Paul, I wish you a very Merry Christmas and Happy . . . Feast of Stephen. Amen.

\*\*\*This sermon is slightly adapted from the December 29<sup>th</sup> sermon written by Rev. Paul Scaer, PhD, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, IN, and printed in 'Concordia Pulpit Resources', Vol. 24, Part 1, Series A, page 20-21