

**Sermon**     December 24, 2024

[Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14]

Pastor Dan Peterson

## **Second Reading: Titus 2:11-14**

<sup>11</sup> The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, <sup>12</sup> training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, <sup>13</sup> while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. <sup>14</sup> He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

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Grace to you, and peace, from God, the source of life, and from Jesus, who life in the world. Amen.

Our second reading is Titus. Titus is a letter ,or epistle, attributed to the Apostle Paul. It is a warning to its recipient to distinguish between lies and truth, between what is right and what is wrong, and to encourage the people with whom Titus is dealing to live upright, morally sound Christian lives.

Most scholars do not believe that Paul wrote Titus, even though it's attributed to them. Instead, they accept, as Raymond Brown puts it, that this pastoral epistle was probably written by a disciple or a sympathetic commentator on the teachings of Paul and the Pauline heritage several decades after the apostle's death, that is, toward the end of the first century.

Why do we call it "pastoral"? Raymond Brown has an answer for that, as well as for pastoral. He writes that designation has been applied to them since the 18th century, when he says them, he's referring to Titus as well as First and Second Timothy, as a recognition of their central concern: no longer the missionary expansion that dominated the first years of Christianity, but the care of evangelized communities after the missionaries have moved on, either geographically or through death. This is a care that we recognize as " pastoral," as I said a moment ago.

It's a warning to its recipient, someone who is caring now for an established Christian community later in the first century, a community that lives in Crete. Now in the first chapter of Titus, the letter says something rather unkind about its citizens. He writes, or rather quotes – it was one of them, one of the Cretans, their very own prophet who said, "Cretans are always liars, vicious, brutes, lazy, gluttons."

Now, he was talking about about a group of people who had a commonly held reputation across the ancient world, going back to when the time this quotation was written, namely, in the sixth century before Christ, by a philosopher named Epimenides.

Now Epimenides is also quoted in the book of Acts, chapter 17, when Paul is preaching to the Athenians, and he says, "As your own poets have said, 'In Him, we live, move and have our being.'"

That line, too, is from a hymn written by Epimenides to Zeus. To *Zeus!*

In this case, we have the same writer, presumably talking not about Zeus, but rather about a small group of human beings who had a notorious reputation.

Why, then, was this letter attributed to Paul? Why does this author quote a Greek, "pagan" poet? What do we make of Titus and its instruction for living a Christian life? Indeed, neither the Apostle Paul and his original seven letters that are uncontested by scholars, nor the book of Acts, ever even *mentions* a mission to Crete or a church in Crete. So what gives this writing, this letter, this epistle, its authority?

Now there are some, to be fair, a minority of scholars who believe that Titus was written after the book of Acts concludes. That's about 20% of scholars, according to Raymond Brown. But I think these questions raise an important one, and that is, again: What gives this writing its authority?

Well, from a Lutheran perspective, we have an answer, and that answer is: **This writing contains the message of the gospel, the message of grace, the message of God's unconditional love for broken human beings.** This message, which Luther insisted, was meant to be proclaimed rather than simply read, gives this letter its authority, no matter who wrote it.

Indeed, Luther says that if Peter or James wrote a letter and it didn't contain the gospel, that letter has no authority. That letter has no authority. Now this seems pretty simple, right? If a letter contains the gospel, it has, from Lutheran perspective, authority, because the gospel directly concerns our salvation.

Things, however, are a little more complicated. "Though short," writes one commentator, "this epistle is theologically packed. It's full of theological dynamite, requiring readers to pause and reconstruct the underlying gospel narrative and theological concepts, which the author often invokes by terse, brief shorthand. What you see here, in other words, is a theological gift; a gift that requires unpacking."

It is a distinctive perspective, yet consistent with the Apostle Paul. This student of Paul's clearly paid attention in class! There are themes that we find in Titus that appear as well in the book of Romans and Galatians, including the theme of "Christ being given for us."

The letter, as I've already said, as well, is important, practically speaking, because it gives us a theological basis for why and how to live a Christian life, and so, over the next three hours, I'm going to tell you – *kidding!*

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So what do we do with a letter that's theologically packed? We unpack it, we unwrap it, and we treat it like a gift, opening it to see what's inside. So let's unpack Titus 2, again, our Second Reading, and then ask ourselves, "What difference does it make? How might this gift change us, and the way we live our lives?"

Now, in my opinion, the best way to do this is to focus on terms in the letter. One of those terms, first is **grace**. We also read about **salvation** in this letter. Jesus Christ is the **manifestation** of God's glory. Jesus Christ in the significance of giving himself **redemption**, or what happened because of this gift; the importance of **purity**, and finally, what it means to be "**zealous for good deeds.**"

Sounds like a lot, but I promise in each of these cases, I can take one to two minutes and no more, to explain this gift and try with you to unpack it, to understand its significance. So let's turn to that reading, it's in your bulletin, and see if we can make sense briefly of Titus 2:11-14.

Let's start with verse 11, "the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all." Now "grace" here is really important. Philip Melanchthon, Martin Luther's right-hand man in the unfolding of the Protestant Reformation, a language scholar, uses the German word for "**acceptance**" to translate "grace" over ten times in a defense he wrote of the Augsburg Confession, (that's a famous founding Lutheran document.) Ten times: "acceptance."

For my money, and this won't surprise some of you, the theologian Paul Tillich in the 20th century, translates it best of all in the title of a sermon he wrote called, "You Are Accepted." You are accepted. That is the meaning of grace, that is a particular kind of Godly love that God embraces and accepts us in the person of Jesus Christ.

So right off the bat, we have the core of the Gospel, the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation, which is taken from the Greek *sotero* and then translated into Latin *salvus*, which means "healing" or "to be restored," bringing restoration, salvation, renewal – not simply something that awaits us after we die, but something in *this* life, a healing power in which we can participate, "brings salvation to all."

To all. What does this mean? "Salvation to all"? Well, in Romans, 11:32, a letter that was indeed written by Paul, the Apostle writes, "For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all."

This gives rise to a great debate: Who are among the elect of God? Is it merely those who profess the name of Jesus? Is it the whole world?

Well, short of knowing an answer to that question, First Timothy, one of the pastorals, gives us a way of approaching this. He says, "We hope for the salvation of all people. – *full stop*. The salvation of all people, and then leave it in God's hands, trusting in God's grace."

So: grace, God's accepting love, salvation, the restoration or healing, begun in this life. And finally, **to all**, presumably, some argue, at least to all human beings.

Verse 12, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age, “to live lives that are self-controlled, upright and godly”. So again, this author isn't interested in theology. This author is not interested in theology. Instead, he wants to make sure that people are living in ways that reflect the gospel of God's unconditional love for them. “Lives,” he says, “that are self-controlled, upright, upright and godly.”

And I would add, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it “lives where we no longer live simply for ourselves, but for others.” This is part of what it means to respond appropriately to the message of God's all-encompassing, gracious love.

You'll also notice in that passage “the present age.” This author is talking about the delay here of Christ's Second Coming, which was not a concern for the original Paul. Hence, another clue that it very well may have been written at the end of the first century, rather and then in the middle, when Paul was writing.

Verse 13 “while we wait” – again, reference to the delay of Christ's Second Coming – “while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

Now this, to me, is one of the most interesting lines, not only in the epistle, but in the whole New Testament! A variant translation reads “the manifestation of the glory of the great God and our Savior.” *Our* translation reads “the manifestation of the glory of *our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.*” Do you hear the difference? This is one of the few passages, *if* our translation is correct, that directly links or identifies Jesus with God – one of the very few in the entire New Testament. (Most of the others appear in the Gospel of John.)

So Jesus Christ, God's manifested grace, the Savior of all, who himself participates in divine reality.

Then we have this word “**manifestation**,” which means epiphany, or disclosure, or revelation, but not just to the mind – it's an embodiment.

And here we have parallel language in Titus 3, the next chapter, where the author writes, “but when the goodness and loving kindness of our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of any good deeds, but according to his mercy through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”

Now, what is the water of rebirth? *Baptism*, the water of rebirth, brings renewal by the Holy Spirit. Do you hear this language of God's loving kindness? When I see that in prayers, I used to think that was just the invention of liberal ELCA pastors, that God is loving kindness, but it's actually Biblical. In this passage, Titus makes clear that God's disposition toward each of us in Jesus Christ is one of loving kindness.

Now, before I go to sleep at night, I often find myself wondering, “Does my faith make any difference in my life? Does this heritage of grace make any difference?”

And when I think of Titus and the language of loving kindness, it does. It does, because I trust that God is of this disposition toward me, and I firmly believe that God

is of this disposition toward each of you, irrespective of your wrongs and faults, as well as mine. It's also God's disposition toward this community of faith. It's also God's will that this faith be restored in the name of Jesus Christ, rather this faith community, as with all faith communities, but lovingkindness.

If you can hold on to two words from tonight's message, I'd like those to be **loving kindness**, the loving kindness or grace of God, which has appeared to us in our Savior, Jesus, Christ.

"It is He," this letter continues, "who gave Himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity."

He who gave himself for us.

Now, when we hear that language, we often think of Christ giving himself for us on the cross; but the bigger sacrifice, I would argue, is God in Christ becoming *temporal*. As Kierkegaard says, God in Christ becoming present to us *in time*, giving up, as it were, God's divine attributes in order to become manifest among one of us as a limited, vulnerable human being,

He who gave himself: This is also testimony to the fact that Christ was not merely a *victim* of God's divine plan. Christ *chose* to live for life and justice, the consequence of which was his execution by state-sanctioned Roman terrorists, and then his vindication in the resurrection by this loving, kind, gracious God.

So when it says "I is He who gave himself," it's important to remember that Christ was not merely a victim, and that the Incarnation, as much as the cross, is an example of the self-giving on the part of God in Jesus Christ, that He might redeem us.

Now I hate the language of redemption. And you know why I hate it? Because nobody knows what it means! I hear pastors constantly use this language from the pulpit, from chances, from lecterns, from altars. But if we don't know what it means, then how can it have any impact on us? And so for my part, it's important to be reminded that "to redeem us" in Biblical language means "to buy us back from slavery."

Now, slavery, as you might know, was a pervasive reality in the ancient world. If you were a slave in the Roman Empire and you ran away from your master, it was serious business. You could be branded on the face, or crucified. So, slavery was part and parcel of the ancient world. That's part of what makes, in context, this message so incredible: that God in Christ has **bought us back** from our slavery.

"Slavery to what?" you might ask. To the power of sin that, through Adam, enters the world like a sickness, like a disease, like a contagion, and turns us in on ourselves, compelling us to live for ourselves instead of each other. The violence, the hatred, the bigotry, all of what you see in this world, is a confirmation of sin's power. But God in Jesus Christ has overcome it. God in Jesus Christ, in principle, has redeemed us from the slavery to self-preoccupation, the slavery to greed and selfishness.

I think, for example, of Elon Musk and yes, I'm going here, \$400 billion. Do you imagine what he could do for the good with money like that? How many lives he could change in a world where 26-28,000 children die every day of malnutrition? Now, none of us can be Elon Musk, (and thanks be to God, we're not – we have souls!).

But we can, in our own way, do what he's *not* doing, which is to say, give back, give what little we have, in some cases, to help our neighbor in need.

Why should we do that? *Because of what God has done for us.* The whole of Christian life is simply living in response to this gift that God has given us, this **redemption**, which is to say, God buying us back from slavery to ourselves and freeing us to live for others.

Now the word purify. Next, you'll see “that from all iniquity and purify and purify, rather for himself, a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.”

So “purify” here is important, because it helps us understand what *kind* of sacrifice, and I want you to listen closely. If you watch Christian television, like the Trinity Broadcasting Network, you're going to hear pastors talk about the blood sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and how that satisfied the anger of God because of sin. But here, the language of purify suggests another kind of sacrifice, which is to say, that in the ancient world, the ancient Jewish world, specifically, people believed that blood would purify them of their sin.

It was sort of the Ajax of the ancient world in spiritual terms, what Jesus is doing when he dies for our sin. It's not dying to appease a wrathful God. It is rather dying to **cleanse us** of our sin. This is an ancient way of thinking. It's a metaphorical way of thinking about the effect of Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection.

Then finally, “for himself, a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.”

I love this! Who in the world would be zealous for good deeds? Do you wake up in the morning excited that you're going to do good for other people? Not if you're like me; you wake up in the morning groggy. You say things to yourself like, “Why does this church have to have an eight o'clock service?” You get really upset, angry at other people, but then, over the course of the day, you realize “I should probably start thinking about others instead of just myself. I can get up early, sure, zealous for good deeds.”

Martin Luther says that “true faith breaks forth naturally in good deeds.” They're no longer something that that you have to do, or something required to be saved, but rather they are *because you have already been claimed.* They are a *response* to God's grace, not an attempt to earn it.

So, to be zealous for good deeds is to live a life of gratitude, to appreciate the gift that you have been given, not only of God's redemption and salvation, which is an ongoing process in this world for all of us, but also in *the very fact that you exist.* Do you know the odds of your existence are something like 1 trillion to one? There is no other collection of stardust like you in the universe. What a gift!

The atheist Richard Dawkins, I quoted him before, he says that “we won the cosmic lottery simply by existing.” What the Christian faith does is give us a way to *thank* that cosmic reality by naming it God.

So to live a Christian life, for Titus, is to live this life of gratitude, to respond appropriately to the gospel of grace, and to do so in a way that builds up the community for the common good.

So what difference does this make in your life? What difference does this make in your life?

I would say, first, be grateful. Be grateful. This is a gift, this life that we have, this healing, this restoration, this salvation we have.

But beyond that, I'm going to invite you to think about this for yourselves. What do these three verses have to say that actually might make a difference in your life and the way you live it? For me, it's a life of gratitude. It's a life of doing for others because of what God, I believe, has done for me.

“Though short, writes one commentator, “this epistle is theologically packed, as you can now see, requiring readers to pause and reconstruct the underlying gospel narrative and theological concepts, which the author often invokes by terse shorthand. In short, Titus contains a gift meant to be unpacked and unwrapped.”

That gift is here for you tonight.

We hope that we have done that, and my hope is that you hear the message of this gift for you tonight, and respond accordingly.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.