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The Natural Knowledge of God
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THE SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

ROMANS 15:4-13

The eschatological tone of Advent is clearly evident in the propers for this Sunday. The Gospel (Luke 21:25-36) with its typically apocalyptic telescoping of the centuries from the Cross to the Parousia stands out in this respect. St. Luke in his account of the death of Christ notes that the signs mentioned by Christ began to occur with His death, the basis of His coming in power and great glory. The church is to watch at all times for His return.

The Introit (Psalm 80) portrays the church as the new Israel, waiting for the coming of her Savior much as the old Israel, living under the judgment of God, waited for her deliverance. (In this Introit one may well wish that Luther's suggestion that an entire Psalm be used had indeed become the rule.) In her years of waiting, the church recalls the resurrection of Christ and the promise which it gave in the same manner in which the older Israel recalled the Passover event. God who gave His promise to men of old is a faithful God. His voice will be heard. When the church's time of waiting is over, her heart will be made glad by His reappearance. (Introit)

Despite all the apparent evidence to the contrary, the church lives in the conviction that God's time will come. Thus in the Epistle St. Paul calls the Romans to a remembrance of God's work in the past. "Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that . . . we might have hope." The Epistle closes with three words which have special meaning in

Advent. They are joy, peace, and hope. Each of them is rooted in His former appearance among men. The church has no grounds for hope, joy, and peace except in Christ. Each of them will be fulfilled when He returns. In the interim the church is to live in the harmony made possible between men by Christ. For even though all are equally under the judgment of God, through Christ all are delivered to be the servants of that suffering Servant who died for both Jew and Gentile. In her patient waiting, the church is to imitate her Lord. The verses immediately before the Epistle help set the stage for this emphasis on the servant role of the church. St. Paul instructs the stronger person to edify his weaker brother and thus imitate Christ, who did not seek His own advantage but accepted for Himself the reproaches spoken against His brethren.

As We Wait

In some areas of Europe Christians have found the custom of the "Christkind" (Christ Child) a meaningful expression of the calling given to the Christian. During Advent each child in the family places a doll's bed by the side of his own bed as a crib for the coming Christ Child. All during Advent the children seek to perform special favors for others in the family. They must be done in such a way that no one detects who has done them. For each such favor, one straw can be placed in the crib. On Christmas Eve a Christ figure is placed in each crib. In this simple way these Christians act out the role of the church while she waits for her returning Lord, lining the world around her with the love of God.

I. God Himself is the prototype for this life of service.

A. The Scriptures record many instances where Israel's God served her. The Introit Psalm recalls His loving care of Israel.

B. That Israel experienced God's judgment upon her sin is not a contradiction of His role as Israel's Servant. His judgment was intended to bring her back to Him and to make her ready for His salvation in Christ.

C. Jesus Christ was the final and perfect expression of God's role in Israel's life. Israel, however, was offended by Him. Her rulers put Him to death because He called her to repentance and to be God's servant in truth rather than in fancy.

D. Even though Israel rejected her Servant God, God chose Christ's death as the means of fulfilling His will for the salvation of Israel. Through Christ's death all of God's proud children are called back to Him and invited once again to become His obedient children and servants.

II. Today God calls the church to imitate His Christ.

A. Whatever was written in the past was written for our instruction in His will for us, namely, that we become servants of God and one another.

B. Joy, peace, and hope are ways of describing the goals of that loving service. As Luther teaches us in his explanation of the Lord's Prayer, it is God's will that all men be saved, i. e., experience true joy, peace, and hope.

C. The church's task is to make them available to men. To become Savior, Christ had to eschew power. His Servant's death opened the way for salvation. The church has no other way to bring joy, peace, and hope to men but to be their servants.

III. Our life as individual Christians should be a copy in miniature of the church's life.

A. We are called to be servants of one

another, of both those inside the household of faith and those outside it.

B. This is a difficult calling. Our "flesh" (Advent I) hinders us. Our hearts often produce a hard bed for Christ to lie in! Yet, this calling is fulfilled by us when we share with one another the love of God, that is, the Gospel of forgiveness. Expressing the forgiveness of God in our lives is the greatest service we can render others, for this is the purpose of Christ's own service.

C. Thereby we also respond to St. Paul's call to a life of harmony. The church expresses her confidence in the promises of God by uniting around Christ in demonstration of the power of the Gospel in word and life.

HANS BOEHRINGER

THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

1 CORINTHIANS 4:1-5

When Israel wavered in her trust in God, He sent prophets to her. These spokesmen of God recalled Israel to the basic fact and purpose of her life. She who had been no people had been made the people of God by His grace and only by His grace. She was to live in a manner faithful to her call. Among the prophets none was greater than St. John the Baptist. He prepared the way of Christ by calling Israel to repentance and faith. But even he gave way to misgivings about the manner in which God was fulfilling His promises. Christ graciously corrects and comforts him (Gospel). The Lord is at hand.

The Lord today prepares the hearts of His people for the Second Coming by giving the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers (Eph. 4). Through them God lightens the darkness of our hearts by His gracious visitation (Collect). Saint Paul acknowledges that he too is subject to the judgment of God as are all of God's people. But he insists that the judgment of

God is based on other standards than those being applied to him. (Epistle)

Criticism had been raised against St. Paul in Corinth: he is not "spiritual" enough; others had engaged in more dramatic exercises of spirituality. St. Paul rejects the criticism leveled against himself. He asserts that God judges the performance of a steward of His mysteries by his proclamation of the one Gospel of grace. This Gospel has no more need of the higher wisdom of the Corinthians than of the works of the Galatians.

Through pastors and teachers God demonstrates in still another way His concern for His people during their vigil. His Gospel, which is mediated through His stewards, meets their need. It is His strength which He stirs up so that His people might live. (Gradual)

Living as Stewards

The popular press has made a sensation out of the Bishop of Woolwich's recent book, *Honest to God*. Part of the dismay is due to the bishop's refusal to act like other bishops, i. e., behaving himself so as not to upset anyone. The clergyman is expected to fit a certain pattern and when he does not, he is suspected of not being faithful to his trust. When St. Paul was accused of not conforming to the image he was expected to live up to, he set the Corinthians straight on the purpose and role of a pastor.

I. The pastor is called to make known the mystery.

A. His calling makes of him a minister (servant) and a steward (caretaker) of the mystery. That mystery is the divine method of redeeming the creation. It involved Christ's humbling of Himself and working out man's salvation by weakness instead of by might. It means the Cross and the reconciliation of men to God through Christ.

B. Christ is the pastor's model. His was a perfect conformity to the role of steward

of the mysteries. His death was the completion of it and the proclamation of it. Men judged Him and concluded that He was a blasphemer and possessed by a devil. Obviously He did not fit their pattern.

C. God's judgment of His stewards is based on the trustworthiness of their proclamation of the Gospel. However, many today desire pastors who are popular instead of prophetic, devoted to organizational matters instead of to sanctity, study, and prayer. When a pastor goes against the prevailing wrong wishes of his people, he finds himself judged. Yet he is called to answer to God for his proclamation of the judgment and grace of God.

II. The Christian layman is judged by the same standard.

A. The layman's calling is also that of a servant and a steward. He is also involved in the proclamation of the mystery.

B. St. Paul's complaint about the Corinthians included their desire to seek spiritual glory apart from the Gospel. Laymen today should be aware of the tendency to make the church serve ends other than that of presenting Christ to the community.

C. The steward must himself experience God's grace if he is to distinguish between organizational busy work and the stewardship of the mysteries of God.

III. The Lord's return will bring all things to light.

A. These last days are the days in which our service and stewardship are to be faithfully discharged. Through them the Kingdom is to be opened to all men.

B. Every failure of the church to concentrate on this effort indicates untrustworthiness on her part. No portion of our population is to be excluded because of social and economic and racial differences. The church — pastors and laymen — is called to give herself in faithfulness to the whole world.

C. Advent is the time for stirring up. The propers for Advent constantly use this expression to plead that God would stir up His might to come. But they also call on us to let God stir up our hearts so that we will both desire and be able to be faithful stewards of the Gospel in our world.

HANS BOEHRINGER

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7

The excitement of life in the church marks the New Testament's picture of the new age that was ushered in by the Incarnation. The New Testament portrays a world trembling on the brink of experiences which transcend anything known before. Perhaps it is more correct to say that it portrays a world in which the transcendent reality flows over our own world, a world which is but a pale reflection of what it might have been were it not for sin.

"Drop down, ye heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness" (Introit Antiphon) sets the theme for the final Sunday before Christmas. God once gave the world a taste of this celestial intrusion when a host of angels dazzled shepherds' eyes.

The divine presence is not absent from the world we now know. The new age is here. The Lord is nigh unto all those that call upon Him in the truth of the Gospel (Gradual). Even now His power is actively at work accomplishing what our sin has been hindering (Collect). The evidences are everywhere.

The church too frequently, because of her lack of faith, does not see Him at work. She sees the opposition of the children of the old age and the failures of her own children. Her children all too often seem to savor the old wine of this age and are drunk on it rather than on the vintage of the Holy Spirit. If her children do not drink heavily of the

Spirit, the Feast of the Nativity will speak to them only of the past and not of the present and the future.

For people who may have forgotten how to live in the amazed anticipation of the New Testament, the Epistle offers four words which reveal the new age in our midst, the Lord who is at hand. They are joy, forbearance, thanksgiving, and peace.

The Lord at Hand

We often experience a bittersweet side to Christmas. The inner warmth and glow the season brings us dies away rapidly. This is because we are content to think of Christmas as an event in the past. The church believes, however, that the Lord *is* at hand, that the proper celebration of His birth requires receiving the benefit of His present activity rather than merely recollecting what He once did. Advent calls us to a lifetime of celebration, of making Christ known and present in this world which waits for His return.

I. The Lord has created a new order.

A. God in His goodness visited His people in Christ in keeping with His promises.

B. Christ instituted a new era. His death and resurrection opened the way for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Cf. Joel 2; Acts 2; John 20, 21.

C. With the victory accomplished, joy, once lost, is restored to the world. Happiness cannot be guaranteed at present, but the joy of salvation is a present fact.

II. A grateful people responds with thanksgiving.

A. Thanksgiving is St. Paul's way of summing up every aspect of the Christian response to the Gospel.

B. In the Eucharist the church gives formal expression of her thanksgiving. By His word the Lamb of God is present and enables us to grow "in faith towards [God]

and in fervent love toward one another." These are the marks of the church's thanksgiving.

III. The peace of God maintains our hearts in Christ Jesus.

A. "Peace be with you" was the greeting given by the Israelites as an expression of their hope.

B. The *Gloria in excelsis* makes it evident that peace — reconciliation — comes through Christ.

C. God is present in our midst through the communication of that peace by Word and Sacrament. We give one another the peace of the Lord alway. We depart in peace from the Eucharist to bring that peace to the world by our words and life.

IV. The redeeming presence of Christ teaches us forbearance.

A. Forbearance means not standing on our rights in our dealings with others.

B. The peace of God at work in us frees us from anxiety over our own needs and permits us to turn our attention to the needs of our brother, especially his need for peace.

C. The bearing of one another's need, sin, and guilt opens the way for the Lord to come into the lives of others.

D. Those in whom the Gospel creates joy offer thanksgiving to the Father by enabling others to know the peace of the Lord. In this way the celebration of the Incarnation of our Lord becomes a part of the church's life as she waits for Him to deliver her.

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CHRISTMAS EVE

TITUS 2:11-14

The Feast of the Nativity of our Lord is the only feast of the Christian year for which

The Lutheran Hymnal appoints two sets of propers, one set for Christmas Eve and another for Christmas Day. Where the people avail themselves of this double opportunity for worship, the pastor has a splendid opportunity to develop the meaning of Christmas in a fuller and more complete manner. And when this is followed by the propers for the Sunday after Christmas, a unity of message, if not of actual theme, is entirely possible.

The season of Advent stirs up within the Christian heart an intense longing for the coming of the Son of God. Advent's thrust is threefold. We prepare for the anniversary of the Son of God's coming in the flesh in Bethlehem. We reach out for His coming to us now in Word and Sacrament. We look forward with expectant hope for His final coming at the end of this age.

In a sense something of the mood of all three of these comings is woven into the liturgy for Christmas Eve. The historic birth is chronicled in St. Luke's account. This is done within the framework and background of Christ's eternal birth of the Father ("The Lord hath said unto Me . . ."). The Gospel sets the crib in our midst while the Introit stresses the divine nature of the cradled Child. The final verse of the Epistle points toward the hope still to be realized when the Child returns to bring this present age to consummation. And all the while, in every part of the service, He comes to us now in grace.

A new day dawns for all mankind when Christ is born in Bethlehem's crib. He brings salvation (healing) with Him. His birth is a call to all men to return to God. His birth makes it possible for men to live God's kind of life once more. His birth provides the ground for the hope that He will return in glory. The Epistle is a call to repentance, an offer of new life, and a stimulus to hope. We may structure the sermon accordingly.

The Grace of God Has Dawned

I. *Calling us back to God*

II. *Offering new life in Him*

III. *Encouraging us to hope*

Introduction: This Epistle sets forth before our eyes the radical nature of the Christmas event. God has made bare His great heart. His great favor toward us sinners is disclosed in the act of sending His Son; the Word of grace and truth becomes flesh. In this act of Jesus' birth, God reveals His determination to restore us again to Himself; to make us receivers of His life and His destiny. That is why we keep high feast. We need God for every moment and every day of our lives. Tonight, through St. Paul, He assures us that we can receive Him to ourselves, for this night the grace of God is dawning, calling us back to God, offering us new life with God and encouraging us to hope.

Part I. It is important that people recognize that God invites them to return to Him in a special way at Christmas time. For various reasons people do not always respond to God's call. They are afraid of Him. They may feel too small to be noticed or to be cared about. They have let God go out of their lives, out of their thoughts and activities, and they do not know how to come back to Him.

Tonight God's grace is revealed to us. As we hear the familiar story from St. Luke, as we sing the traditional hymns and carols, we see God at work laboring and struggling to give Himself to a world which has rejected Him and turned away from Him. To people who don't even deserve Him God willingly comes in love.

God wants to return to our hearts and lives. He doesn't want to frighten anyone away. So He comes as a tiny, helpless, little Child. He offers Himself in a tender, simple way. His love and kindness appear as a revelation—as something new and wonderful

and unheard of. How could He indicate His grace better than by sending His Son into our world? His grace appears in the Incarnation. His grace could be seen and handled and touched. It can be recognized and understood. Through the Son the Father calls us to become His children.

He does this through the forgiveness of our sins. We need to be the people on whom the grace of God dawns because we need His power for life. And this is what the forgiveness of sins does — it brings God back into our lives. To be forgiven is to have God's life and God's power and God's Spirit restored to us. This is the gift He offers us in the manger bed of Bethlehem—the forgiveness of our sins.

Part II. The efficacy of the grace of God can be seen in the individuals who have become God's children. The end result of the revealing of the grace of God is the new life we can now live before God. The forgiveness of sins brings life. The force of the twelfth verse represents the necessary successive stages of the Christian life. A return to Baptism is suggested. There must be a death to sin, renouncing godless ways and worldly desires. This precedes the entry into new life. Having repudiated the devil and renounced all connection with worldliness, we receive from God the power to live a life of service to Him and our fellowmen.

We cannot see God's grace; we cannot grasp it. We can be sure of it, though, when men live their lives under God, using His power for life. The new life that St. Paul describes is something that is concrete and can be seen. It is the visible assurance that the invisible God is working in us. God's Christmas gift is a useful gift. It offers us a new life, a new pattern for living, and a new power.

Part III. The final verse of the text describes the glad expectancy which is the ruling and prevailing thought in the lives of men who are looking for their Lord's return.

From the world's viewpoint there may not be much to be hopeful about. But for the Christian there is reason for hope. He can manage to live in this world with all its problems. He can remain unmoved in the midst of all the upheaval and turmoil around him because he looks forward to the fulfillment of his happy hope. He knows that each day brings him that much closer to the day when he finally will see His Savior as He really is. Now he moves by faith. Now He knows only the crib and the cross and the empty tomb. But that day is coming when Jesus Christ will be fully revealed with His Father as God from all eternity. Toward that day he strives; for that day he longs and hopes. And that hope is in itself a special Christmas gift — the unshakable conviction that the grace of God has appeared in Bethlehem and will appear again in glory.

JOHN DAMM

CHRISTMAS DAY

ISAIAH 9:2-7

Introduction: *Look* magazine referred recently to the celebration of Christmas in our day as "Christmas in crisis." It seems true that more than ever people are aware of the fact that we live in a time of crisis. Millions of people wonder if they will still be alive come Christmas Day. Our lives seem to hang by threads — threads strung between Washington, Moscow, Havana, and New York — threads that tighten almost to the snapping point as the clock of crisis ticks on.

And in the midst of crisis, we come into the house of God to celebrate the nativity of God's Son and join in the angelic adoration we revived last night: "Glory to God on high and on earth peace, good will toward men." It sounds rather paradoxical — a world on the brink of destruction and a church that sings about peace. Let's think about that this morning as we consider our

Christmas sign of certainty and peace and hope.

Our Christmas Sign of Certainty,
Peace, and Hope

Background: The Epistle's message was first spoken by the prophet in the presence of King Ahaz. Isaiah had been called to an emergency meeting of the cabinet of this king of Judah to participate in a serious discussion about the fate of the kingdom. King Ahaz was in very great distress. In one day he had lost 80,000 of his people, and now 200,000 more of them had been carried away as prisoners of war. And now two mighty totalitarian powers were hurling new threats of aggression at him. The times were very gloomy. Ahaz was looking for advice. In which direction should he go? With what other countries should he ally himself? How could he best meet these new threats of death and destruction? In answer to these questions and as a proposal for future action, Isaiah spoke the words of today's text. And in so doing he gave voice to the heart of the Old Testament message. In this hour of national crisis, Isaiah had recourse to the fundamental promise of the Messiah. He pointed out to Ahaz that the God and Father who had created the world in which he lived and who even now upheld it by His mighty hand planned to send deliverance and peace, and He planned to do it in His own unique way. In this moment of national indecision in Judah, Isaiah pointed the king and his counselors and all the people to the over-riding power and majesty of Him who holds the destiny of all men in His hands. And Isaiah assured them that God, in His own way and time, would bring His creation to its final destiny.

In his country's hour of need, when men did not know where to turn for help, when the times seemed more bewildering and confusing every day, when totalitarian neighbors were poised ready to strike — this is the message God puts in the mouth of His holy

prophet. We do well to listen to this message and search it out for meaning.

Part I. Though we might appropriate millions of dollars to send men to the moon and other planets, it is actually our earth which is the visited planet. The staggering truth is that in this vast mysterious universe, of which we are but an infinitesimal part, the great God and Creator of all chose to visit our planet. It is from this conviction that there springs our unquenchable certainty. Note the first phrase of the text: "Unto us," who dwell on this planet, "a Child is born, a Son is given." Today we celebrate the birth of this Child. Born of whom? Born of the Virgin Mary and therefore flesh and blood, a human being exactly like us in every physical way. But also on this day a Son is given. Given by whom? By His Father, and therefore divine; the Son is God of God, very God of very God.

The sign of our certainty in the midst of a planet filled with confusion and uncertainty is twofold: the sign from beneath—born a human child; the sign from above—given by the Father of Lights. Therefore this Christmas Day we worship the God-Man, Jesus Christ. And so it was throughout His life, always these two together. At His birth a manger for the Child, the angelic chorus for the Son. In His life, hungry Himself, to show His human nature; yet feeding 5,000 to indicate the power of the Son. At His death, a dying like a child of Adam; yet triumphing over death as the Son of God.

Why the emphasis on both of these? Because one without the other would not have been enough. He must bear the weight of government upon His shoulders, Isaiah says. Normally we expect everyone to bear his own burdens. And since we have sinned, we ought to bear the punishment of that sin. Our nature has sinned, and we ought to suffer. Hence the Child. But that which we ought to bear, we are unable to bear. We cannot endure God's wrath for sin. But

God's Son could, hence the Son. Either alone would not have been sufficient. If He had not been the Virgin's Child, He could not have suffered. If He had not been God's Son, He would have been overcome by the suffering. So that He might share our woes with us, He was born a Child; that He might triumph in those woes and procure victory for us, He was declared the Son of God. ("Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten Thee.")

And as the Son He bears the weight of government, the ruling of the world on His shoulders. Ultimately it is not the Khrushchevs or the Kennedys who bear the weight of the government of this world on their shoulders. They have their authority only by divine delegation. The ultimate power and authority God was pleased to bestow on His only-begotten Son. He who loved us enough to die for us, upon Him rests the weight of this world. Herein lies our certainty.

Part II. But the prophet goes on. He identifies this God-Man as the Prince of Peace. He is given in order to establish a government. He visited this planet in order to claim us as members and subjects of His Father's kingdom. By natural birth we are citizens of the kingdom of this world. We are captive to this kingdom and slaves of death. Our problem is a total one. It reaches to the very core of our being. But He is our Prince of Peace. By His coming He has established that peace within us that neither death nor world nor devil can take from us. Citizenship in His kingdom grants us a peace which passes human understanding. It establishes within us a peace that remains and that gives balance and strength in the midst of all the unrest and peacelessness in the world.

By faith in this Child born of a Virgin, the Son given from the Father, we are members of the heavenly kingdom. By Holy Baptism we were given the status of sons of God, members of a new government. As

Christ identified Himself with us in order to rescue us and grant us His peace, so now by faith we identify ourselves with Him and share in His victory.

What God began in a manger in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago may seem long ago and far away to you today. It may appear to be quite far removed from your problems and your life. But what God began there was for you, and as you accept it as done for you it becomes eternally contemporary. It offers victory over this confusing world and liberation. By faith we learn to harness the power of God for the solution of our problems.

Part III. Make no mistake about it, this seemingly helpless Babe is the Mighty God, and He holds the universe in His hands. The government is upon His shoulders. Therefore, in the midst of all the turmoil and distress of nations, in the midst of all the evil that we can neither understand nor control, we have the assurance of His lordship and rules. Because of Him we know we can hope. And we believe our hope will be realized. The world has never been able to understand this. It is confused and misled by outward appearances. The Mighty God, the Prince of Peace disguised in flesh and weakness! He was born in a stable and had no place to lay His head. To this day He comes in similar guise, in simple words, in bread and wine. Like Joseph and the Virgin Mary and the shepherds, we are not offended at His use of humble means. For through these means we behold His glory and receive His grace and truth. We have the assurance of His holy Word and Sacraments — the assurance of His continuing presence — and the certainty that this Child is the Son of God and that upon His shoulders rests the ultimate destiny of us all and of this visited planet upon which we live. He has conquered death and hell and has forgiven us all our sins. We have found our peace in Him amid the chaos of our

times. And we look with hope to that second visit, in majesty and power. And until that day we can wait with joyful expectancy and calm assurance. JOHN DAMM

SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

GAL. 4:4-7

The Sunday within the octave of Christmas is exceptionally rich in thought and expression. On Christmas Day we had one primary thought: Christ is born for us. It is only as the days after Christmas unfold that we begin to realize the full consequences of Christ's birth. Today's worship has this added significance to attach to the good news of Christ's birth: The birth of Jesus in the poverty of the crib of Bethlehem is a prelude to His death on the cross. He was born so that we might become the sons of God.

Sonship Through Faith

- I. *Faith in the Christ Child makes us God's sons and heirs*
- II. *We should put our faith in the Christ Child*

Introduction: Children of God — aren't we all? Not by right of birth, not naturally, the Scriptures say. We are like the pouting toddler who stuffs his suitcase into his wagon and peevishly leaves home. We are self-made orphans, alone and apart from God, battered about, "slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe."

And we need a father. There is this aching — but acknowledged — homelessness. Thomas Wolfe sums it up for us: "The deepest search in life, it seemed to me, the thing that in one way or another was central to all living, was man's search for a father, not merely the father of his flesh, not merely the lost father of his youth, but the image of a strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief and power of his own life could be united."

God understands this need. He wants to become our Father. He wants us to be His children. And in the text St. Paul tells us how this can be accomplished: we can become God's children and heirs through faith in the Christ Child.

Part I. Each one of us wants to be God's child. To be God's child means to be able to depend on God as a Father, to draw on His power to live a good life. It means to have love, joy, peace, happiness, certainty, and eternal life with Him. All of that is ours when we are God's children. Who of us doesn't want to count on God as a loving Father?

But we try to become God's children and heirs in our own way. We try to get the happiness that comes with being a child of God through our own means. (Here we can draw on our own personal experience in the parish to illustrate this in terms meaningful to our hearers, thus employing images that are familiar to them.)

But all our attempts to become God's children and heirs fail. Oh, we may succeed to some extent. (Here recapitulate the examples of the above paragraph, drawing out the enjoyable aspects of them.) But we are plagued by sickness, which robs us of security and happiness. We have family and vocational problems, which rob us of our peace. Death comes and takes away our loved ones who bring us the most joy. In spite of everything we try to do to make life meaningful and worthwhile, we still are not God's children and heirs. And that is an awful state in which to be.

And yet it's not strange at all. We fail to find what we want out of life because we are separated from God. God, after all, is the source of all good and perfection. If we had God, we would have real happiness, real certainty, real peace. But when we don't have these things, then it's obvious we don't have God. It becomes evident that we have separated ourselves from Him.

God's Law separates us from Him. God's Law demands that we be holy and good and perfect and without sin. It tells us that unless we fulfill God's will, God will have nothing to do with us. God's Law shows us that we are not the way God wants us to be and that our sins have separated us from Him. God's Law is speaking to us everytime we fail to achieve happiness or find peace or have certainty. The troubles and problems of our life are used by God to tell us that we don't have Him as our Father. God's Law keeps us from God. If ever we are to become God's children, God Himself must provide the way.

And God did just that. "But when the time had fully come," the crucial D day, the zero hour, "God sent forth His Son!" Spirit-conceived and woman-born, the Son lived within the bounds of our existence. He bound Himself to our mortal frame. He identified Himself with us. He shared our blood and sweat and tears. And He gladly mounted the cross "to redeem those who were under the Law, so that we might receive the adoption of sons." He acted mightily to free us from our self-imposed slavery to anxiety, death, guilt, and meaninglessness. He paid the cost and signed the adoption papers with His blood. He lived and died and lives to make the Father available to us.

God has done everything to make it possible for us to be His children. We need only accept His gracious offer of adoption. That's faith. Faith accepts God's gracious offer. Faith looks into the manger and says: "God, You say I am Your child because of this Baby lying in a manger. God, I believe You. I am Your Child. You are my Father!" Faith is not merely some kind of mental O.K. to what God says. Faith is the inner conviction and witness that we are God's children. It looks to God and cries out, "Abba, Father!" Those who say this with all their hearts can be sure they are no longer separated from God. By the power of His

Spirit God has created faith in them. Faith is the answer to the problem of how to become the children and heirs of God. Through faith we become God's children and heirs.

Part II. Then we should put our faith in the Christ Child. When we do so, we acknowledge we can't make ourselves happy and bring peace and eternal life to ourselves. Instead we acknowledge that God gives us all these things because He has made us His children and heirs. We see God and not ourselves as the source of all good. God makes us happy. Not the kind of happiness that comes from possessing a new home or a new car or fine clothes. But it's the happiness that comes from having the world's greatest treasure, God Himself. When we have become God's children, then His power is within us, transforming our lives and filling them with new meaning and purpose. We can't be anything but happy. God gives us peace. That peace isn't temporary or transitory. It is a serene, inner calm that results from believing we are the children of a loving Father who watches over us.

Everything good comes from God. Everything that comes from God is good. When we put our faith in the Christ Child, we believe with all our heart that God does everything for our good. Regardless of what comes to us or happens to us, we trust God and look to Him for help. That's what it means to put our faith in the Christ Child. Faith is depending on God for everything. Is that the kind of faith we have? If it isn't, then right now we must take a long look at the Christ Child as He lies on His bed of straw and ask ourselves who He is and what He did. He made us God's children and heirs because He is the Son of God Himself. When you believe that, when you call God your Father through Christ, then you will depend on Him for everything.

Putting your faith in the Christ Child means not only depending on God for every-

thing; it means living as God's child. Faith is the inner conviction that we are God's children. If we are God's children, then God's Spirit lives within us. God Himself works within us so that we will live the way He wants us to live, so that we will do His will. God's will can be summarized in one word — love.

In carrying out the will of our Father we seek to live the life of Christ, our elder Brother. We follow in the footsteps of Him who perfectly fulfilled the Father's will. As we look into the manger, we see love in action. Because of love He laid aside His almighty power and humbled Himself. Because of love He sacrificed all that was rightfully His to live a life of suffering and pain. Because of love He was obedient to the Father's will even to the point of dying for us. We learn to love in the same way. As God's children we no longer make ourselves the center of our lives, but we learn to live for God and for our fellowmen who need us. Those who put their faith in the Christ Child live as God's children. Has faith done that in our lives? If it hasn't, then we haven't placed our faith in the Christ Child as we should. Then we've got to come again with the shepherds and see in that Baby the Savior, Christ the Lord, and realize that through Him God has made us His children.

Conclusion: Christ came to earth with flesh and blood on that first Christmas to make us God's children and heirs. He comes to us now under bread and wine with His flesh and blood. He wants to come to each one of us in His holy Sacrament and unite us to God through Himself and so make us God's children and heirs. When we come to the altar to receive Him, we are placing our faith in Him. We are confidently believing that we are God's children. We are depending on Him for everything. We are receiving the power to live the way God wants us to live.

JOHN DAMM

THE CIRCUMCISION AND
NAME OF JESUS
(NEW YEAR'S DAY)

GAL. 3:23-29

Background: Last Sunday we heard in the Epistle: "When the time had fully come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, to redeem those who were under the Law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." Today's Epistle continues that same theme. The Feast of the Circumcision marks another phase, another step, in Christ's great work of redemption, which began with His incarnation and birth and ended with the death on the cross and the resurrection. The circumcision has special significance because in this act the first drops of the precious Redeemer's blood were shed, the first sign of that shedding of blood on Calvary that would accomplish our rescue.

This Epistle was probably appointed because of its reference to Holy Baptism, of which circumcision was regarded as the Old Covenant type. Through the rite of circumcision the person entered into a covenant relation with God. Abraham's children became the heirs of the promise. Through the action of the circumcision men were marked as belonging to God's people.

The Gift of a New Name

I. *Self-made prisoners of God*

II. *Reclaimed and renamed*

Introduction: Eight days have passed since the night of the angels' song of glory to God. Eight nights ago we were all aglow with expectation. God's grace was about to dawn upon us, and we were eager to receive the gift of new life that His grace offered us. We heard again the glad news of peace and certainty: "Unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given." And the following Sunday St. Paul assured us that God's Son came to make us sons of God. The holy Child was born to bestow upon us the dignity of chil-

dren of God. Now today's Epistle repeats this theme in a slightly different form. And we have every reason to drink in this message — for it sums up once more the whole purpose of Jesus' coming and what has happened to us as a result of His birth.

Part I. The important point here is that "Law" be understood as a religious word. It defines a man's relationship to God. At first hearing the King James Version of our Epistle might not make it sound too awful. The full force of it comes home, however, when you listen to the *New English Bible: New Testament*, which speaks of us as once "close prisoners in the custody of law." Then something of the horror of man's situation comes home to us. The Law is a prison to those who have not yet come under God's grace. And no prisoner enjoys his situation. In the first part of the sermon it is important to dwell on this picture. Actually it is not until you have been released from the prison of the Law and turned around and looked at it again that you begin to realize what an awful, horribly wretched thing being a prisoner of the Law really is. St. Paul uses such dramatic words as prisoner and school children under a harsh teacher precisely to bring this home to us.

The message of both is the same. To be under the Law does not mean simply that we attempt to live our lives in conformity with God's moral law; it means trying to live our lives without God as the power and motivation for all of our living. It means not simply missing the goal of perfection set before us, but missing the goal of God Himself. It means not just slipping up on the doing of some commandment, but slipping away from God.

But the Law is a good schoolmaster if it can teach us to realize this. The Law is not to teach us another Law; it is to lead us to Christ. We must attempt to make our hearers see the folly of continuing in a self-imposed prison. God did not intend for us

to be His prisoners, His captives, who out of fear or even hatred do His bidding lest we be punished still further. God intends that we should be His free children, His heirs.

Part II. By faith we become such children of God, such heirs. We are given the names sons of God, heirs by promise. We could not come to God by ourselves for we were enmeshed in the Law. Our sonship with God begins with God's choice of us. It never begins with our decision to leave the prison house of the Law and come to God. You don't make your way into God's family. He must first call you "son." You have no claim on Him until He says, "Come." Our adoption as sons is not something that is "coming to us" by virtue of our birth. It is something conferred upon us by God's free choice through an event — the event of Christ, and it is a sheer act of grace.

Here we go back to Sunday's Epistle. God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the Law, to rescue us who were prisoners to that Law. It was not enough that Christ take on Him our flesh. He had to be made under the Law. He took upon Himself not only our nature but our debt, our nature and condition both. For our condition was that we were under the Law. And when did this happen? When was He made under the Law for us? On the day of His circumcision. For St. Paul testifies to this: "You can take it from me that every man who receives circumcision is under obligation to keep the entire law" (Gal. 5:3 NEB). At circumcision Christ entered into a bond with us, and as a sign that He did so, He shed a few drops of His blood as a pledge that He was ready to shed all the rest when the fullness of time came. And at this moment He is given His name, the name of Jesus, a Savior. For then He took upon Himself the obligation to save us. And what He undertook at His circumcision, He paid in full in His passion and death so that He could cancel the sentence of the Law that stood in force against us. (Col. 2:14)

In Holy Baptism God applied that saving work of Christ to us. When we were baptized, the sentence of the Law was canceled. We were reborn as sons of God. Baptism is God's doing among us, one of God's special assurances among us that He is powerfully present to save us, that is, to restore us to the dignity of sons. St. Paul's words leave no doubt in our minds — "Baptized into union with Him, you have all put on Christ as a garment." In the ancient baptismal ceremony a white cloth or robe was placed upon the candidate immediately after the administration of the sacrament, signifying that he was now clothed with the pure, white, unspotted righteousness of Jesus Christ, whose dear child he had become. To put on Christ means nothing less than to become God's son. It means deliverance from sin, death, and devil. It means transference from the status of prisoners and harshly treated school children to the freedom of sonship. Everything Christ did for us, from the moment those first precious drops of blood were shed, is given and bestowed in Baptism.

Conclusion: Here is the sharp focus of it. God sent forth His Son that we might become sons. We do not call Him Father until He first calls us son. He has made it possible for us to be released from our self-made prison of the Law. In our baptism He made us His children. Never can Baptism be considered anything but God's action. In this sacrament God has given me His all. He has given me the forgiveness of sins and sonship and made me an heir of all His treasures. This is the gift for which faith reaches out; the gift of a new name. This is the gift to which faith clings.

JOHN DAMM

THE SUNDAY AFTER NEW YEAR

1 PETER 4:12-19

Strange that the Epistle and Holy Gospel for this second Sunday after Christmas should mention suffering. Yet it is not a bad time

for us Christians to be reminded that we can expect to suffer in this life as Christians. Not always outward persecutions but real sacrifices and hardships of one kind or another come even to the person who responds to the love of God. In today's Epistle St. Peter assures us that as Christians we are able to rejoice in the suffering that comes to us. Just as we rejoiced last week at the birth of the holy Child, so now we can rejoice that as His followers we are able to suffer in His name.

Able to Rejoice in Suffering

I. *Fellowship with a God whose Son suffered in our stead makes our human suffering meaningful.*

A. Some Christians in St. Peter's day were tempted to lose their faith in God when terrible persecutions threatened them (v. 12). It is still the same today — people are tempted to give up their Christian faith when awful events befall them. Most of us have heard someone say: "I can't believe in God anymore, because if there is a God, why does He permit war, why does He allow accidents to happen, why does He let my loved ones suffer?"

B. The sacred writers do not run away from these questions. But one of the most remarkable things about the Bible is its account of how men have found their faith raised to the highest level at precisely that point where one might expect them to lose it. **Think of Abraham.** In the moment when Isaac lies ready for sacrifice on the altar, Abraham's steadfast trust teaches him the deepest meaning of fellowship with God.

Or think of Job. The long-winded speeches of his friends cannot explain the dreadful things that have happened to him. So in his misery Job is driven away from all human answers. Finally he turns to God Himself. Only then can he say: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him."

Think finally of our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Here at last we understand the pil-

grimage of these men in the Old Testament. Here at last we find light for our own pilgrimage. Did not Christ take upon Himself our human flesh so that He might take upon Himself our human miseries? Christ came to suffer with us and for us, and ultimately, of course, this meant the cross and His sin-aton-ing death. On the cross He gave meaning and direction to every moment of our lives.

C. In the midst of our human suffering our Christian faith offers us not a theory about suffering but fellowship with God, who in His Son shared our suffering. In reply to our doubts God offers us not an idea but a Man — "the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all" (1 Tim. 2:5, 6). When you and I try to comfort someone in suffering, we know that words and ideas are quite futile. For what the suffering person needs most is not our ideas about suffering but ourselves.

II. *As we hold on to the gift of God's love in Jesus Christ, we can rejoice in our own suffering and use it to do good works.*

A. This is the keynote of today's theme. Of course, we should not bring suffering upon ourselves by doing evil (v. 15); but when it comes upon us in the name of Christ, we should rejoice. St. Peter here tells us of something uniquely Christian — not to be ashamed of but to rejoice in suffering. Then we begin to experience the graciousness of God. We need never face suffering or tragedy alone. Because of Him, we can accept the worst that befalls us, and instead of being driven into bitterness, we find in our suffering the way that leads to an even deeper communion with God, for He is the God who turned the suffering of Calvary into the glory of Easter.

B. In our hour of need God sends us not an idea but a person — Jesus Christ, through whom He bestows on us Himself and His love. In that same hour let us respond by giving God not words but a person — our-

selves, our hearts and wills. In His Word and in Holy Communion God gives us His power for a new life. He gives us the will to do right. He gives us the faith to entrust ourselves to Him, come what may (v. 19). We offer ourselves to God in the General Prayer: "Receive, O God, our bodies and souls . . . for Thou hast purchased us to be Thine own that we may live unto Thee." That offering of self expresses itself in the offering of ourselves to our brothers in need.

We have worshiped at the manger of the Christ Child again. Our worship today equips us to step courageously into the new year. We shall surely meet the onslaughts of Satan at every turn. But we know that his purposes cannot succeed, for Christ truly rules and exercises His lordship (Introit). Placing ourselves in God's hands we can rejoice, and sharing in the suffering of Christ, we know that soon we will be called upon to share in the glory of Christ.

JOHN DAMM

Teaneck, N. J.

EPIPHANY

ISAIAH 60:1-6

What happens to the parish priests as they try to minister to the needs of the pious and secular American? Some become so discouraged that they quit. Some seek calls to greener pastures where parishioners will appreciate their ministry. Some become quite vocal in their criticisms of their parish. However, and particularly on Epiphany Sunday and the Sundays that follow, most will want to arouse their parishioners by echoing Isaiah 60:1-6: "Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. Etc."

Introduction to the sermon: Many political and economic prophets will be forecasting the future at this time of the year. Their optimism and/or pessimism may influence our attitudes. Their views, no matter how well documented, are not the foundation for

"the hopes and fears of all the years" as expressed from this pulpit. The basis for my message is the Word of God. It addresses itself to us who live in the present situation (regardless of what it is) and says: This is no time for pessimism; rather, it is a time to

Arise and Shine!

I. *Take courage, your light has come*

A. If we were to judge the church's past performance this morning, we would be forced to admit that we have been somewhat less than courageous, aggressive, Scriptural. In fact, we have been rather timid, apathetic, unscriptural. (Cf. *The New Shape of American Religion* — Marty; *Pious and Secular America* — Niebuhr.)

B. Remember who Jesus is. Our past indicates that we have forgotten. Our Lord and Savior is not timid, apathetic, anemic. Remember Him, and take courage.

1. Jesus is *the* Light of the world. He is the Light, not just a light. None overshadows Him; none equals Him. The Western world owes its civilization to Him; the Eastern world acknowledges that His teachings are the basis of all morality. He is the One whom God has exalted and given a name that is above every name (Phil. 2:9, 10). Cf. Eph. 1:20-22, Acts 4:12.

2. His message of reconciliation, His ministry, is the power of God unto salvation. He offered life and light, and He delivered them.

3. He is the fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecy. The Bible is a book of hope and promise for the world. These hopes and promises are based on a specific activity of God — His incarnation. It is our contention that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself. (2 Cor. 5:19)

4. He is the One whose birth prompted angels to sing, wise men to journey, shepherds to hasten. God said of Him, "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

His ministry of healing earned the praise of most men — and the bitter hatred of others.

5. Remember, we are not waiting for this light to come. He has come. The world has seen it; the church has received it. Look up and see for yourself.

C. Remember who you are. Our past indicates that we have forgotten this, too.

1. You are God's children by virtue of His creation and your baptism. You are numbered among His heirs; and, as such, you can eagerly await the consummation of His glory. Cf. Collect for Day.

2. You are a holy people. God has separated you from the rest of the world and consecrated you for His purpose. You bear His image, faint though it may be.

3. You are priests. The priesthood of all believers is a reality, and you are a vital part of it.

May the remembrance of Christ and His coming and the remembrance of who you are give you the courage to arise.

II. *Arise*

A. The world situation may be discouraging, but it is not beyond hope.

1. In spite of the brilliant performance of man, the world is still in darkness. Don't be fooled. The artificial lights of the theater marquee, business, science, and industry have made the world a more convenient and comfortable place in which to live, but they have not dispelled the spiritual darkness which hangs over the souls of men.

2. This darkness becomes apparent as the world flounders around in search of a savior (cooperatives, United Nations, medicare, psychiatry, social security, automation, unions, etc.). The darkness is caused by sin. They have no cure for it, nor will they find one outside the church.

3. The situation is not impossible because we have the answer to sin in Jesus Christ. We can share it. "One man awake can awaken another. Two men awake can awaken a third. Three men awake can awaken a village. So, for heaven's sake, wake up!"

B. The situation in the church, or your own particular situation, may be discouraging, but it is not beyond hope. We may have felt lonely, unwanted, discriminated against. We may have been guilty of negligence, exclusiveness, cruelty, and a preoccupation with comfort. But God has spoken to us. He has called us. So, for heaven's sake, wake up. Arise.

III. *Shine*. We've been timid too long. He calls us to be courageous, aggressive.

A. Talk it up. Don't be ashamed of your Lord (cf. Hymn 346), the church to which you belong, the Gospel which is the basis of your hope and joy. Let people know what you believe and why. This isn't bragging. This is witnessing. You are to share that which you have seen, heard, and received.

B. Live it out. Just as we have been negligent in witnessing, so we have neglected living out our Christianity. Christ would have us stand up, throw off the works of darkness, live in the light as children of light, that men may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven. He lived it out for us. Now it is our turn to live it out for Him.

We've taken our first steps in the new year. Let's not be discouraged by the prospects of the future nor build hopes on false promises. But, on the basis of God's Word, let us arise to meet the future and be resplendent with God's glory that the world may find its hope and salvation in Him.

EDWARD H. BIRNER

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