

“Rejoice in Jesus Our Savior”

Psalm 98:1-8, Matthew 1:18-25, Titus 3:4-7

Pastor James York

December 25, 2016

You are the reason for Christmas for Jesus came to be with you. It is Jesus' birthday we are celebrating, but Jesus brings the best gifts such as eternal love, salvation, peace, joy, grace, and abundant life. Let your heart overflow with love as you treasure the fact that God loves you with an unmeasurable love and proved it by sending Jesus. We love, because God first loves us.

The sun had set and the wind had an extra bite in it as it picked up the snow and blew it into the six year olds face. This child strained to pull his small wooden sled loaded with a fifty-pound bale of hay through the deep snow from the barn to the side of the house. He knew he had only a few minutes, as everyone was racing to complete the evening milking in order to be on time for the Christmas Eve worship. Having completed his chores, he was suppose to be getting ready to go to church. Mom and Dad would be coming up the path any second. If he could just get this bale on the roof before they came along, for it was a cold night meaning Santa's reindeer would need food to complete their journey. Santa would be all right, because most kids would leave him a snack but not the reindeer because none of the kids from the city would even have access to hay. If he could just get the bale on the roof the reindeer could eat while Santa was in the house. He studied the situation earlier and thought that the snow bank was high enough for him to push the sled carrying the bale up onto the roof. He didn't want to ask anyone for help because he was a little suspect of the validity of Santa and if this hay disappeared without his parents knowing it was on the roof then he would know for sure that there is a Santa. "James York what are you doing with that bale of hay?" asked my mom as my parents ran up the path. I nervously began to explain that Santa's reindeer would be hungry. My Dad quickly agreed and told my mom to go ahead while he threw the bale of hay up on the roof. As my dad and I were getting out of our winter gear, I expected to get disciplined for my little escapade instead my dad asked if I thought Santa would be able to break the bale of hay open. I hadn't thought of that. I would need to leave my jackknife by the plate of cookies just in case Santa forgot his. As I rode to church, I was glad that Santa's reindeer would have food. On the way, Dad, like he did every year, explained that this year Santa might be at our church, because Santa always stops and worships in every state. He knows the real meaning of Christmas is the celebration of Jesus' birthday and God's love for us which is far more important than delivering gifts. I remember thinking I hope the sermon is short if Santa comes to our church, because he has a lot of stops to make. Santa wasn't at church that night, he must have stopped at a church with a shorter service. Early that morning I was awoken by the noise of Santa on the roof. I heard a loud thud as Santa's sleigh came to rest on the roof and then I heard Santa walking around the roof and talking to the reindeer. I looked at the clock it was 5 a.m. it had to be Santa for Dad would already be in the barn milking. As I jumped out of bed my older sister met me at the door and motioned for me to be quiet. If Santa hears us, he will not leave any gifts so we better hide. After the coast was clear I ran downstairs to see the gifts and then outside. Sure enough all that was left were a few spears of hay on the roof. I will always remember the actions of my parents on that Christmas for it was just one of the many ways that they showed me how much they loved me.

The historical Saint Nick was a passionate worshipper and follower of Christ. The gift of the Christ child filled him with love inspiring him to love. Amazed by God's grace and salvation he gave with no strings attached and freed people from poverty. Rejoicing in Jesus his savior he desired to spread joy wherever he went.

Saint Nicholas attempted to follow the Christ child by serving others in whatever way he could. He was born to wealthy parents, and was in line to enjoy the luxury of earthly prosperity. But he heard the challenge of Jesus to "Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor", so he used his whole inheritance to assist the needy, the sick, and the suffering. He was made a bishop of the church while still a young man and became known for his love of children and his generosity to those in need.

Christmas is a good time for us to do a glory-check. We need to ask ourselves where we are finding glory in our own lives. Is it in our achievements, in our prosperity, in our enjoyment of a pile of gifts on Christmas morning? Or is it in our service to others, in sharing the love of Jesus, and spreading the glad tidings of Jesus' saving love?

Around the time that Nicholas was performing his ministry, another bishop was called to the royal court by the Roman emperor, and ordered to produce "the treasures of the church." The emperor felt threatened by the growing Christian church and wanted a piece of the wealth that he believed the Christians must possess.

The bishop protested, saying that the church had no gold or jewels or other valuables. But the emperor was adamant and demanded that the riches of the church be brought to him in the morning. The next day, the bishop appeared at the palace doorway. He was empty-handed. "I told you to bring me the treasures of the church!" the emperor thundered. The bishop then invited the emperor to look out at the palace steps. Gathered together, peering sheepishly at the great doors of the palace rising above them, was a mass of beggars, cripples, slaves and outcasts. "These," said the bishop to the emperor, "are the treasures of the church." The treasure of the church is all its people — it is a treasure made up of everyone who believes in Jesus and serves and loves in the name of Jesus. Our glory is found not in gold or jewels or the gifts we found under the tree this morning but in the opportunities we have to love our neighbors and to show generosity to those in need.

On Christmas day, God gave us the greatest present of all time — the gift of his Son, the Savior of the world. Jesus is a free gift. An undeserved gift. A gift that carries with it the unconditional love of God. Grace is sometimes defined as the undeserved gift of God's own self. And that definition certainly fits God's generosity through Christmas. This is a present that brings God right into the heart of human life. It's a gift that saves us and connects us to our Lord for all eternity. It's a gift of God's own self. A gift of grace.

Inspired by Jesus, Saint Nicholas lived a life of love, giving, expecting nothing in return. On three different occasions, he gave bags of gold to poor girls needing dowries; and by doing this, he saved them from being sold into slavery. He became well-known for his goodness, his compassion and his generosity, and was famous for doing whatever he could to protect people who were in danger — especially children.

We love, because God first loved us. Arnold Fleagle calls the birth of Jesus the "great exchange for God sent the pure for the impure, the Divine for the human, the Prince for the pauper. There is no parity in the manager of Bethlehem for God emptied heaven's bank with the expenditure of God's beloved son, which can never be equaled by anyone who receives the priceless treasure of Jesus. It is only by God's love that the unequal can be made equal. Jesus Christ humbled Himself so that every sinner could become a saint, so that every orphan could become a member of the family of God. The Son of God became a human child, accessible, approachable, and adorable. We did not come to Jesus, but Jesus came to us." Jesus comes and knocks on the door of every heart hoping that he will be invited in for he wants to become your close personal friend and savior. Rejoice in Jesus our Savior. Be amazed and inspired by the personification, the incarnate love of God, in the babe laying in that lowly manger in Bethlehem. Praise God for the unmerited gift of Jesus and for Jesus' promises. Jesus said I will never leave or forsake you. Jesus promises to come again and take us with him so that where God is there we can be also. The book of Revelation puts it this way, "See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them; they will be God's people, and God will be with them; Jesus will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more for the first things have passed away."

After Christmas worship people commented to Martin Luther, "We wish we could have been at Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus to present him gifts and praise." Luther replied, "Jesus is in your neighbor today. Start by sharing your love and gifts with them." After the glitter of lights and tensile is boxed up and the presents opened and perhaps forgotten, it is the love we receive from God and share with each other that will last. Amen