

Sermon Notes for 12/25/15 (Christmas Day)
Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Titus 3:4-7

Theme: GOD’S MERCY MISSION TO PLANET EARTH

The Point: God’s “salvation invasion” marks our world as beneficiary of God’s grace embodied in His Son, who is our Lord.

Introduction: A group of scientists and researchers centered in the Netherlands have launched a program called “Mars One,” which aims at putting human beings on the planet Mars by 2025. This is one of the more remarkable undertakings of our day. The plan is to send several “advance” launches, which would deposit on or around Mars a communications satellite, a rover, and several complex items that could be assembled into a housing area by the astronauts who would arrive later on, after a 7-month trip from earth. So by 2025 we may have the opportunity to witness human settlements on another planet. But this mission is nowhere near as complex or as important as GOD’S MERCY MISSION TO PLANET EARTH.

The first thing we need to note is that this is GOD’S salvation plan. You think planning for 2025 seems to be a long shot here in the waning days of 2015. God’s plan called for eternal planning. He designed it, long before He even brought humans into the creation that He had made. St. Peter, in writing about the sacrifice that Jesus made for us, says, “He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake.” Before the first atoms were brought into existence by God’s “Let there be,” He had plans for the redemption of a wayward and rebellious people. That remarkable plan had as its focus what we celebrate today, the birth of the One who is the Firstborn of the Father, full of grace and truth.

Before the first dramatic shining of light in this world, God had your salvation in mind, and it involved placing His light, the Light of the world, into a manger bed in Bethlehem. Isaiah put it this way in today’s Old Testament lesson: “See, your salvation comes.” God’s salvation “comes” – it comes at His initiative, not ours. It is

not forced or coerced. It comes by His power, not by any human accomplishment. That salvation is not manufactured or built by human efforts.

He saves us according to His mercy and according to His plan (including the blessed washing of Baptism). Hear again those blessed words of the apostle Paul in today’s epistle, written to his companion in ministry, Titus: “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” We dare not try to rely on our own strength, our own abilities, our own exertions to win our salvation. No, indeed, it is solely due to God’s mercy that He carries out this mission to planet earth. He recognizes our need. He refuses to stand off in some distant corner of the universe (or beyond it) and condemn us from afar. He will not simply crush this planet out of existence and start over (as He could easily have done). Rather, He cares. He loves. He has mercy. His mercy is always busy and active, reaching out to save those who are in need. He claimed you in the baptismal waters – or, if not yet, He would love to do so.

God acts in response to our tragic and fear-marked condition. When the angel of the Lord, accompanied by the glory of the Lord, stood before the shepherds, “they were terrified.” They “feared a mega-fear” is what the Greek literally says. They shook in their sandals. They figured they were done for. God’s glory is more than mere sinners can endure. Have you known that sort of “mega-fear”? What did you feel when the doctor spoke that awful word “cancer” or “diabetes” or “heart attack” over your frail body? Was that a “mega-fear”? What about when your son or daughter came to you with a confession of a wrong-doing that you could hardly imagine they would be capable of? What about when your husband said he was leaving you for another woman? What about when the stock market crashed and wiped out your retirement savings? How did you feel when the hurricane or tornado or earthquake struck near you? Satan loves to throw all sorts of things at us to make us shake

in our boots. And he is usually pretty successful. So the angel's first words are (as they usually are when angels meet with human beings) "Fear not," "Don't be afraid." He wanted to put them at ease, to let them know that he had not come (as he might have) with sword and spear to put them to death, as the angel brought death in Egypt at the time of the Exodus or to the Assyrian armies in the fields surrounding Jerusalem during Hezekiah's reign. No, this angel comes with GOOD news, news of great joy ("mega-joy" to cancel out their "mega-fear").

You have all no doubt seen the TV special, "A Charlie Brown Christmas." Charlie Brown is best known for his uniquely striped shirt, and Linus is most associated with his ever-present security blanket. Throughout the story of Peanuts, Lucy, Snoopy, Sally and others all work to no avail to separate Linus from his blanket. Just having the blanket in the washer or dryer causes no end of trauma for Linus. And even though his security blanket remains a major source of ridicule for the otherwise mature and thoughtful Linus, he simply refuses to give it up. Until one moment in the TV special, when he simply drops it. In that climactic scene when Linus shares "what Christmas is all about," and he quotes the passage from Luke that is today's Gospel reading, he drops his security blanket, and this is certainly an intentional move by Charles Schulz. Most telling is the specific moment he drops it: when Linus utters the words of the angel messenger, "Fear not," the blanket hits the floor. Nothing else could cause Linus to drop his blanket. But now the heavenly message spoken by the angels brings him a new center for hope and security, bundled up in "a child wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." We who have known mega-fear can find peace and hope in only one place, at the manger bed of the "out-of-this-world" Child cared for by His mother Mary and step-father Joseph.

After the announcement of a child lying in a manger, the angel is joined by "a multitude of the heavenly host." The word "host" is probably better translated "army" or "armies." The angel armies of heaven suddenly appear. More reason to fear with "mega-fear"? No, for these armies have not come to do battle with frail and faulty

humans. If that were the case, we would faint away, for sure. But they come to underline the initial angel's words. They come to announce peace by announcing the birth of the Prince of Peace – a peace that comes by the offer of forgiveness and a new relationship with God. A Child – a Savior, the Messiah (Christ), the Lord – these are terms of distinction that speak to what God is up to on Christmas Day. In St. John's Revelation, he records his vision of the one called "Faithful and True", riding on a white steed. He continues, "The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean." These armies are dressed in victory clothing, not in battle gear. These armies have known the peace that comes from God's own Son invading human history.

M. Luther: "Thus the most precious treasure and the strongest consolation we Christians have is this: that the Word, the true and natural Son of God, became man, with flesh and blood like that of any other human; that He became incarnate for our sakes in order that we might enter into great glory, that our flesh and blood, skin and hair, hands and feet, stomach and back might reside in heaven as God does, and in order that we might boldly defy the devil and whatever else assails us. We are convinced that all our members belong in heaven as heirs of heaven's realm."¹

The shepherds are amazed – at being the objects of God's revelation ("which the Lord has made known to US"). They had no reason to expect that God would favor them in this way. Polite society of their day avoided shepherds like lepers. And yet they become the first witnesses to this blessed invasion of God, of His mercy mission to planet earth. I am reminded of the lepers back at the time of Elisha, when Aramean King Ben-Hadad besieged Samaria for so long that some Israelites had even resorted to cannibalism, eating their own children so they could stay alive. Things got so desperate

¹Luther, M. (1999, c1957). *Vol. 22: Luther's works, vol. 22 : Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 1-4* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (Jn 1:15). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

that these 4 leprous men decided to surrender to the Arameans, hoping they would be given something to eat, but figuring if they were killed, it would be no worse than what the city would go through in days to come.

When they snuck out to the Aramean camp around dusk, what a surprise! God had caused the Arameans to hear the sound of chariots and horses and a great army, and everybody had deserted, leaving their weapons and treasures and horses and supplies behind. Those four lepers had the run of the camp, all the food they could eat, and for a time they feasted and hid some of the treasures. Then they came to themselves and said, “We can’t keep this to ourselves.” Of course, they realized that if they tried, they would be discovered and then punished severely. So they came and brought the news to Samaria, and that day the city was spared, and they became heroes.

The shepherds were also amazed at the high point of history that they were now part of. Nobody really thought much of shepherds – they had a similar reputation to what we used to call street bums – they were not trusted, they did not fit into polite society, they were constantly unclean from a religious perspective. In their lowliness, these shepherds discovered that God’s grace also extended to them, and thus to all. M. Luther: “Therefore whenever you are concerned to think and act about your salvation, you must put away all speculations about the Majesty, all thoughts of works, traditions, and philosophy—indeed, of the Law of God itself. And you must run directly to the manger and the mother’s womb, embrace this Infant and Virgin’s Child in your arms, and look at Him—born, being nursed, growing up, going about in human society, teaching, dying, rising again, ascending above all the heavens, and having authority over all things. In this way you can shake off all terrors and errors, as the sun dispels the clouds. This vision will keep you on the proper way, so that you may follow where Christ has gone.”²

²Luther, M. (1999, c1963). *Vol. 26: Luther's works, vol. 26 : Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann,

Conclusion: You may not qualify for the Mars One mission (I, for one, am too tall! What a shame!). But every one of us as sinful and needy human beings is a candidate for God’s saving actions in Jesus, the Son of God born of the virgin in Bethlehem. God’s “salvation invasion” marks our world, the world of weak, sinful, frail humans, as the beneficiary of God’s grace embodied in His Son, who is our Lord. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote this about Christmas: “Only the humble believe him and rejoice that God is so free and so marvelous that he does wonders where people despair, that he takes what is little and lowly and makes it marvelous. And that is the wonder of all wonders, that God loves the lowly.... God is not ashamed of the lowliness of human beings. God marches right in. He chooses people as his instruments and performs his wonders where one would least expect them. God is near to lowliness; he loves the lost, the neglected, the unseemly, the excluded, the weak and broken.” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *God Is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas*)

And so you can be certain that this God, this creative and saving God, loves and cares for you also, whatever your brokenness. Regardless of whoever else may be against you, knowing that this God is for you makes all the difference. The God who has created all things has invaded our space-time history to be one of us, in order to redeem and rescue us from sin and death. This Good News enables you to live with confidence in the future, knowing that our Lord holds that future in His hands. This Good News enables you to serve with eagerness, knowing that no service of yours is ignored by the One who will finally be Judge of all. This Good News enables you to live freely and thankfully, to the honor and praise of the One born to be King in your life also, even if you shuffle off to Mars some day. AMEN!

Ed.). *Luther's Works* (Ga 1:4). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.