

"Go through the Gates"

Isaiah 62:10-12

December 25, 2005

The Nativity of Our Lord

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Boise, Idaho

Pastor Tim Pauls

10 Go through, Go through the gates! Prepare the way for the people; Build up, Build up the highway! Take out the stones, Lift up a banner for the peoples! 11 Indeed the LORD has proclaimed To the end of the world: "Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Surely your salvation is coming; Behold, His reward is with Him, And His work before Him.' " 12 And they shall call them The Holy People, The Redeemed of the LORD; And you shall be called Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken.

This is the Word of the Lord.

I. Sinful, Sold Out, Abandoned, Forsaken

"Go through the gates! Get out. And go away." That was the message to Adam and Eve. It didn't have to be spoken, and the angelic creatures didn't speak. No, God had placed cherubim at the east of the Garden of Eden with a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life. The message was clear: for their own good, lest they eat from the tree of life, Adam and Eve weren't welcome in Paradise. Get out. Go away.

You know that story well. God had created the heavens and the earth, then all that was in them, then the garden. Then He put Adam and Eve in the Garden, and gave it all to them. It was a perfect world, sinless and holy. There, in the Garden, God could walk with Adam and Eve, speak with His people. He'd created them with soul and flesh and blood that would live forever.

There was only one way for this to go wrong; and despite God's clear command, Adam and Eve listened to Satan's temptations. Wanting to be like God, they ate the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; and so they brought sin into the world.

It would never be the same. Once they were holy and righteous; now they were defiled with sin. Once they freely walked with God; now, for a piece of fruit, they'd sold themselves into the slavery of sin. Once God came to walk with them in the cool of the evening; now, the silent cherubim stood with fiery sword. Once they'd been in communion with God, but now they were driven out because they'd forsaken His Word.

Nothing would ever be easy again. For Eve, even in the miracle of childbirth there would be immense pain. For Adam, every acre of ground would feature thorns and thistles that would make his work miserable. Their marriage would be rocky from now on: Eve would desire to manipulate her husband, even as Adam would try to rule over her. And then it would get worse: They would have their first two sons, and they would live to see Cain murder Abel in the fields. They and their descendants were unholy, enslaved, cut off from God, dead in soul and dying in body. The joy of being a human being had taken a definite hit.

But there was a thread of hope in all of this. Adam and Eve could still remember the promise that the Lord had made to the serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel" (Gen. 3:15). The Seed of the woman would crush the devil and his power. Adam and Eve would ponder these words as they fingered their tunics made from the innocent animals the Lord had sacrificed to cover up their shame.

Good thing they had that Word to go on, because the cherubim said nothing.

Read through the Old Testament, and the themes remain the same: the descendants of Adam continue in sin—unholy, enslaved, cut off from God and dying. But God remains faithful to His promise; and as He promised the Savior to Adam and Eve, He promised it to His people in Isaiah's time, as they watched man's rebellion doom Jerusalem. You hear the promise repeated in today's Old Testament lesson: "Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Surely your salvation is coming; Behold, His reward is with Him, And His work before Him.' " And they shall call them The Holy People, The Redeemed of the LORD; And you shall be called Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken (Is 62:11-12). Once again the Lord promised the Savior, that His Son would be born to the Virgin Mary, to be the Savior of the world.

And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn (Lk. 2:6-7).

The Savior was born. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, had become flesh in order to redeem the world. Because man had sinned, man had to die for sin—but the Lord does not desire the death of anyone. Therefore, He became man in order to take man's place—to die on the cross for the sins of the world.

Mark with joy the miracle of Christmas, the Incarnation of our Lord. By trying to become God, man condemned himself. Therefore, God became man and condemned Himself instead. That is why the Baby has flesh and blood, fingers and toes—to be your Savior by His perfect life, His perfect suffering and death, and then His resurrection. He is born to be your Savior!

And how does the Lord first announce the Savior's birth? He sends angels to speak! For the angel declared to the shepherds: "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" (Lk. 2:10-14)

Ah, once outside of Eden, silent cherubim stood with sword to send man away. Outside of Bethlehem now, angels are no longer silent. They speak! They sing the praises of God and they don't say, "Stay away!" They tell the shepherds to go—go to the Savior. They tell them to run to the Son of God. By this Baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, you are no longer lost in your sin and separated from God. This Baby is your Savior, shepherds; by Him and His work for you, you will be with God in Paradise forever.

II. Holy, Redeemed, Sought Out, Not Forsaken

Though 2000 years have passed, are we not in the same world today? Yes, it is all too true: we live in a sinful world, and we are sinful creatures ourselves—by nature unholy, enslaved, cut off from God, dead in soul and dying in body.

The work of sin is evident in guilt, in the knowledge that one has done something wrong or simply is wrong. It may be the undeniable feeling of being soiled or defiled, of having sacrificed purity and trust for something that was no gain at all. It may be the despair of having been used, the frustration that one can't go back and undo the damage, take back the words. This is evidence of sin, as it separates you from others and from God.

It is evident in the slaveries of this world. There will be those who have enslaved themselves to this lust or that addiction. There will be those who experience the terrible feeling of being sold out or bought and owned. Lose integrity, and you've lost freedom; the walls begin to close in.

It may be the depression of abandonment. There will be those who suffer the loneliness of grief when a loved one dies or the ostracizing brought on by past mistakes. There will be those who hear the devil's whispers that "no one cares" and believe them. There will be those who sense the need for redemption, but believe there is no way to find it.

It may be the evidence one finds in being forsaken, dumped, abandoned—left by others for different friends or greener pastures. It may be the grinding curse of chronic illness that robs of energy and health, leaving one beaten down and exhausted. It may again be the far worse conviction that one is has been forsaken by God, that the angel still holds the sword and says, "Get away from here. You can't be with God anymore."

You will see these evidences of sins demonstrated in the lives of those around you. You will suffer these temptations yourself. That's quite a load to mention on this Christmas Day, but I do so for a reason: all of these temptations meet their match in the manger. All of these manifestations of sin which seek to isolate you from God fall to pieces because Mary's Son is Immanuel, God with us.

Oh, when you are afflicted by temptation, troubles and past sins, the devil will use each one to say, "God is far from you, and you from Him; and there is no way that you can be with Him in Paradise now or forever. Heaven is too far away!" At such times, you remember the Infant in the manger. You rejoice to confess, "He was made man!" This is your comfort: your Savior is born. And He has lived and died and risen to forgive your sins and give you life.

Because of the Savior, God does not look upon you, beloved child, and bind your guilt to you. Instead, for Jesus' sake He declares, "Your salvation has come, for Jesus was born for you. I do not call you guilt-ridden, unholy and defiled, because He has taken your sins away. Instead, I call you holy, pure, righteous, because Jesus has taken away all your sins. Once, you were not My people. Now, I call you My Holy People."

Because of your Savior, God does not leave you enslaved in sin. He declares, "By many desires of the flesh, lusts and sinful impulses you have sold yourself into sin, and a slave of sin is not a child of My household. But I would not leave you there. Therefore, I have sent My Son to be born of Mary, to take on human flesh like yours. He has suffered the judgment for your sin; and by His sacrifice on

the cross, He has bought you back. Therefore, for His sake, I no longer call you a slave of sin. I call you the Redeemed of the Lord, for Jesus has redeemed you, purchased and won you by His holy, precious blood and by His innocent suffering and death.”

Because of the Savior, God does not leave you lost in your sin and trapped in transgression. He does not wash His hands of you. Instead, He says, “So that you might be forgiven, I have sought you out. I sent My Son into the world to take on human flesh like yours, to save you from sin and forgive you. I sent out My Word, and thus you have been found. Because while I sent My Son for the world, I sent Him also specifically for you. That is why I have baptized you in My name. That is why I feed you My Supper. That is why My Word still sounds forth. I do not call you lost. I call you Sought Out, and I will be with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Because of the Savior, you are not abandoned. No, God declares, “Sin sought to isolate and kill you for eternity, and so I sent My Son. He became flesh, just like you, and went to the cross for you. For your sake, He suffered the isolation of hell on that cross, because I forsook Him so that I would never forsake you. For your sake, He suffered the loneliness of the tomb with His body, so that I will raise you up from the dead, body and all, on the Last Day. I do not call you abandoned: I call you Not Forsaken.”

You are holy. You are redeemed. You are sought out by God, and you are not forsaken. The Lord bids you to go through the gates, to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Why? Because of the Baby in the manger. Make no mistake, that the miracle of Christmas is the Son of God in human flesh. Where Adam lost paradise for all, Christ is born to restore paradise. Where Adam’s sin destroyed the flesh God created, Jesus took on human flesh to destroy sin. That’s why the angels sing to shepherds. That’s why the shepherds run to Bethlehem. He is born to be your Savior. And for His sake, you are forgiven for all of your sin.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen