

Epiphany 1

Titus 3:4-7

January 9, 2022 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

Your Savior Has Appeared!

He came because of God's mercy

He came through baptism

It was the perfect storm in Virginia last week Tuesday. First, it rained and then the temperature dropped below freezing turning the rain into ice. Once there was a good layer of ice on highway I-95, it started snowing. If those conditions took place here in Wisconsin, it would be terrible. But Virginia drivers are not used to snow, nor do they have many trucks prepared to spread salt and plow snow. Along a 30 mile stretch of the highway, hundreds, maybe thousands – no one is quite sure – of people were stranded. There was nothing they could do to help themselves. They could not dig their way out. They could not rescue themselves. Someone had to go to give them help. Many spent over 24 hours in their car before the highway was cleared. It was the perfect storm. Amazingly, there were no deaths or injuries.

That horrific traffic jam is emblematic of our life on this earth. We were born into the perfect storm of a sin-infected world. Our parents were sinful so, even before we were born, we were infected with sin. That sinful nature has seeped into our brains so that impure and unloving thoughts race through our minds. At times, when we open our mouths, that sinful nature spews out some pretty nasty stuff before we can stop it. And sometimes, that sinful nature riles up our emotions that we end up doing things we know are wrong. Like stranded motorists in a snow storm, we could not do a thing to help ourselves. By nature, we were not just in a traffic jam, we were going in the wrong direction. We were doomed to eternal death. We needed someone to come and rescue us. We needed a Savior.

This morning, our ears perk up a bit to hear the good news that the Apostle Paul wrote to Titus. He explained (:4,5), “**when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us.**” “Kindness” has the idea of taking action to help someone and “love” refers more toward the attitude of the heart which moves someone to help. The word “appeared” is a translation of our word for the season – Epiphany. This morning we again rejoice that our Savior has appeared. Our rescuer has come. Not only that, but Paul tells us that “**he saved us.**” May we never get tired of hearing that phrase again and again. The work has already been done. The victory has already been won. Alleluia! This morning, as the Spirit blesses us, we will see that our Savior comes because of God's mercy and he comes through baptism.

He comes because of God's mercy

Paul continued in verse 5, “**he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.**” First, Paul tells us why we were not saved and then, he tells us why we were. He is being extra clear because this is such an important point. God did not save us because we did anything good. Coming to church, supporting the gospel ministry, living a moral life, being nice to others – all good things – do not earn you any credit with God. If you multiply any number by zero, the answer is zero. All of our good works multiplied by our sin still leaves us with our sin, a big zero in our account with God.

My niece told me how she adopted her pet dog. She went to the animal shelter and asked to see what dogs were available. As she walked past all the kennels, each dog made its best case for adoption. They barked excitedly. They wagged their tails. They whimpered. But then she saw one dog who was simply sitting in his kennel looking sad and lonely. Her heart went out to that dog and she took him. She and Jake are still getting along very well.

That's kinda sorta what God did, but not quite. God's heart did go out to us, but it's not that we were so cute that he was drawn to us. To continue the dog analogy, we were flea covered, rabies infected mutts foaming at the mouths and eager to attack anyone that came near. The Bible explains that we were, by nature, enemies of God. God did not send us a Savior because we were worth saving. Nor is it that God looked at our hearts and saw at least some goodness like the Grinch who stole Christmas had. We were completely corrupt. Nor is it that God looked into the future and saw that we were going to be good church members and decided to save us. Nor is it that God needed us to keep his church on earth going. The **ONLY** reason Jesus came to be our Savior is because of God's mercy.

Mercy is very similar to love and grace, but it has more of the idea of sympathy and compassion. It's what moves you to stop your car and help someone when you see another car skid off of the road and flip over a few times as the driver is thrown out of the car. How can you not stop to help, or at least call 911 for help? God saw us suffering and struggling because of our sinfulness and the results of that sinfulness; things like fractured marriages and families, drugs and drunkenness, jealousy and greed, and on and on. The sin that Adam & Eve introduced into our world has brought all sorts of other difficulties with it, such as health problems, viruses that keep mutating, harsh storms, aging and failing bodies and finally death. God saw our helpless condition and his heart was moved to help. He was so moved that he was even willing to send his one and only, his special, his perfect son, to rescue us even though it would mean his son's death. Jesus perfectly obeyed his Father's will and came into this world to live the perfect life you needed and

to die the innocent death you needed. Because of God's mercy toward you, Jesus died and freed you from all of your guilt. Your sin and shame are gone. Your sins are forgiven. You have already been saved. Alleluia.

He comes through baptism

I once spent a good deal of time with a prospect who believed that baptism is only symbolic, that it does not have any power. He told me that he got a concordance and looked up every passage with the word "baptism" in it. He even twisted those passages to fit in with his presupposition instead of letting God's Word guide his thoughts. And, because he only looked up the passages with the word "baptism, he missed reading Titus 3:5-7. As the Apostle Paul wrote to young Pastor Titus, he could not have been more clear about the power of baptism. He explained that Jesus comes to us through baptism.

Paul continued in verse 5, "**He [God] saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.**" Paul did not use the word "baptize." Instead, he described its power and effect. Paul talked about a washing which makes us born again. That is the kind of being born again that Jesus explained to Nicodemus (John 3:5), "**No one can enter the kingdom of God [be a believer] unless they are born again of water and the Spirit.**" Both Paul and Jesus agree that baptism gives us faith. It has the power to make someone a believer, someone who is spiritually alive. Baptism does not just symbolize a spiritual washing, it actually, really washes all of your sins away. Baptism is visible grace. It is a tangible expression of God's undeserved love for you. If you ever feel as if no one truly, truly loves you or cares about you, you can smile to know that you are baptized. That is visible proof that God loves you as an individual. How much more could anyone hope for? How much happier we will be when we remember our baptism each day. I wish I was so spiritual that I thought of my baptism every time I washed the dirt off of my hands. Not too long ago, I mentioned that one of my friends splashes a few drops of water on his face each morning as a tangible reminder of his baptism. Maybe hang a picture of your baptism in your hallway so you see it every day. Every day you can say, "I am baptized. God loves ME. God saved ME. Alleluia!"

There is a cross connected to the top of our baptismal font and the pastor made the sign of the cross over you at your baptism as reminders that your baptism connects you to your Savior Jesus. In this morning's gospel lesson, we saw Jesus being baptized. It was the beginning of his formal ministry. St. Matthew tells us that, at first, John the Baptizer did not want to baptize Jesus. John knew that Jesus did not need to be saved from any sins. But Jesus insisted on being baptized because he wanted to connect with you. Think of it this way. When the water of baptism was poured over you – when you

were under the water – who did you meet in the water of baptism? You met Jesus! He grabbed hold of you and promised to hang on to you forever. That's what is behind Paul's explanation (:5,6), "**He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.**"

And if that was not enough to fill our hearts with comfort and joy, Paul keeps adding to the good news message (:7), "**so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.**" Did you hear about the mistake that a bank in England made? Thousands of people received a surprise gift on Christmas Day when a bank accidentally deposited £130 million (\$176 million) across 75,000 transactions. The mistake happened when payments from 2,000 business accounts in England were processed twice, meaning some employees saw their wages double, while suppliers also got more than they were expecting. The bank said the duplicate payments were caused by a "scheduling issue" that has now been rectified. The bank is still trying to recover all the funds they accidentally sent. Those people were happy to see extra money in their accounts, but they have to return it. Through your baptism, God has deposited something much more valuable than millions of dollars into your account. He has deposited salvation and you do not have to return it. You are justified – declared innocent of all sin. To God's way of looking at you, it's just as if you never sinned at all, not even once. Heaven is yours. Most certainly, baptism does not look like much – some water and a few words wafted to the wind – but it is the way that Jesus connected himself to you here and eternally. It is the way that Jesus appeared to you as your Savior. He came to rescue you because of God's mercy and through your baptism.

Rejoice and be glad! Live each day of your life like the child of God you are as you shine your faith and show loving kindness to others, especially your family. No matter how messed up our world gets and no matter what difficulties you face, there is no need to panic, because your Savior has appeared. Amen.