

Sunday, December 18, 2022 – Advent IV (Rorate Coeli)

Matthew 1:18-25 (ESV) – “Sunday School Christmas Service”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen.

“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.’ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.’ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.’”

At this time of the year, many people are trying to come up with that last “great” idea for a Christmas gift for one or more of their loved ones. And, retailers are more than happy to oblige. The month of December has the most sales in the retail sector than any other month, because people are much more generous now than at any other time during the year. We give gifts to each other, but I wonder sometimes if we forget why we are giving them. Do we give presents to our families and friends because this is something that we have always done? Do we do it because we don’t want to be ashamed or embarrassed when we don’t reciprocate the gifts that we receive from others? I’ve even heard of family customs where a certain dollar amount is agreed upon, so that everyone receives roughly the same valued item. But, what is

the real reason for giving gifts to each other during this Christmas season? What do we do when the giving of gifts becomes hollow and lacks significance? We should turn to the Gospel at times like these, and remember that the greatest gift ever came into the world 2000 years ago at this time, and that gratitude and love flowing from God's wonderful generosity is the motivator behind the gifts that we give to others. Or, to put it more simply, we give to others because we have been blessed in every way by our gracious and loving Father in heaven.

The children relayed this Gospel message in the Christmas Program that we just heard and saw. They stated very clearly that Jesus is the greatest gift that the world has ever received, because without Him, we would have no hope for the future. Without Jesus and the inheritance that He gives to us, the only thing that we would have to look forward to would be eternal death and complete separation from God forever in the fires of hell. We are sinful and unclean creatures, and can do nothing to save ourselves from the wrath of God that is rightfully coming. As the prophets foretold, the Savior is coming, not because we deserve it, but because He wants to come to us and bless us. This same Jesus, Who was promised centuries before His incarnation, is the One that would die on the cross for the sins of the entire world. He was born to die! Although we might not like to hear this sad truth at this joyful time of the year, the fact remains that the only reason that He came was to save us from our sins by hanging on a tree of shame. This is an unpopular message, which flies in the face of the rationalizing that goes on in contemporary society, but it is a story that must be told, for the good of all people.

So, what should our reaction be? After we have heard this Good News, how does it affect us? The shepherds and the wise men, and the others who crowded around the manger in the stable in Bethlehem were united in their response – they went and told others about it. That's what the Holy Spirit urges us to do, and gives us the will and the ability to do so with

those who are within our spheres of influence. To a world that doesn't recognize the earth-shaking consequences of the birth of the Messiah 2000 years ago, we are heralds to proclaim the truth, possibly for the first time. For those who have heard the truth, but have fallen away by becoming enamored with this sinful world and its desires and cares, we speak the need for repentance, but also the loving and welcoming nature of our loving Father, who waits for us to return to Him with baited breath. He uses each one of us as His instruments; His hands, His lips; His representatives. This is too important a message to bury it under a bushel of fear and apprehension. The hope of the world is fully embodied in the birth, death and resurrection of Christ. He is the greatest gift that we could ever hope for, and He comes to us without regard for our worthiness to receive Him. That's what makes Christmas such a special time of the year.

When the Christmas season seems to be void of excitement, and we think that there is just nothing left to give thanks for, we are reminded of the simplicity, yet profoundness, of the fact that Christ came down to us at Christmas. He deigned to come to us, and take on human flesh, and be like us in every way, yet was without sin. He did this because of His love for us, and because He did not want us to perish, but have eternal life. When we give gifts to others this Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, let us be mindful of the fact that the gifts we give are mere reflections, indeed, responses, to the love and gifts that God has given to us through Jesus the Christ. This will keep our perspective and focus exactly where it should be – squarely on the Savior, Jesus. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.