

“God is Love”

1 John 4:1-11

Christ is risen!! He is risen indeed!! Alleluia!!

In recent weeks in particular, I have thought a lot about how we are so blessed to be part of the richness of the liturgical life of our church. I have also been thinking a lot about the way in which we are so richly blessed with seemingly unlimited access to the Word of God in a way that no generation in history has ever had. Last week, we had a youth group event and in my opening devotion, I asked the kids how many of them had a Bible in their home. All 13 of them raised their hand. The kids were quick to offer that they had more than one.

We have Bibles in every pew here at church. In my newsletter article for May, I wrote about how excited I am to have the entire ESV Bible on my phone. With one touch of a button, I have the Word of God before my eyes (or ears. With a second touch of a button, there is an audio version – although I prefer to read it myself).

It is in His Word and nowhere else that God permits Himself to be found. In our Epistle reading, John has a warning for all Christians,

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.” There is a spirit of truth and a spirit of error. The spirit of truth confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh and that He is the propitiation for our sins – that is, he is the sacrifice that satisfies the justified anger which God has toward sin.

This is what the Ethiopian eunuch was confused about as He was going along reading the prophet Isaiah. He was reading the Song of the Suffering Servant from Isaiah 53 – I quoted a different part of that chapter last week. “It was the Lord’s will to crush Him and cause Him to suffer . . . to make His life a guilt offering.” And today we hear, “Like a sheep He was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before his shearer is silent, so he opens not His mouth. . . For His life is taken away from the earth.”

In recent days, as I pondered the liturgical life of the church and the role of the Word of God bringing us into proximity to God, I was reminded of Paul Gerhardt’s Advent hymn “O Lord, How Shall I Meet You”, which is hymn number 334 in our hymnal. Paul Gerhardt lived about 100 years after Luther and was one of the greatest hymn writers in the history of the Church – and I am not just limiting that to the Lutheran Church. The richness and depth of his words have served the church very well.

In verse four of that hymn, Gerhardt writes: “Love caused Your incarnation, Love brought You down to me; Your thirst for my salvation procured my liberty. Oh, love beyond all telling, That led You to embrace,

In love, all love excelling, Our lost and fallen race!"

What caused the Son of God to leave the realms of heavenly light and come into this dark "valley of the shadow of death", experience the incarnation, that is take on flesh, breathe our poisoned air and drink for us the deep despair of God's just judgment and condemnation? He loved us.

For all of the depth and insight Paul Gerhardt brought to his hymnody, the simplicity of the Gospel remains. God is love, and as St. John says, "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." It was our heavenly Father's love for us that is the cause of the Son taking on flesh and blood. God's love for us is the reason for the season in Advent and Christmas, and in Lent and Easter.

And it is God's love for us that removes our "sad-heartedness and deepest gloom" as Gerhardt says in verse five of the hymn (which unfortunately was left out of the new hymnal). The Psalmist says, "O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise...even the darkness will not be dark to you." Paul Gerhardt writes, "Despair not, He is near you, Yea, standing at the door, Who best can help and cheer you And bids you weep no more."

God is with you always. As opposed to the popular world view of God, He is not merely seated in the heavenly realm looking down on us from a distance. He is near you. He is in you. Your body is His temple.

Through the Word of God, you have proximity to God.

God, our King, does not rule over us as if we were nameless, faceless subjects whose individual concerns were of no real consequence. He spends time with each of us, is present everywhere, and is forever concerned for us out of love.

So also, our redemption and salvation could not happen through an arbitrary edict announced from a distance from on high. God, as the Just Judge, could not merely announce the forgiveness of all sins from His throne. His Son had to enter this world, experience the troubles and weaknesses of human frailty, and shed His blood as the final atoning sacrifice – the ransom price for our slavery to sin.

All this was done out of love for us. As John writes, “This is love, not that we have loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” As Paul Gerhardt writes concerning Christ, “Love caused Your incarnation, Love brought You down to me; Your thirst for my salvation Procured my liberty.” Thanks be to God – we are forgiven and we are free. Amen.

Christ is risen!! He is risen indeed!! Alleluia!!

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.