

Help Has Arrived!

Isaiah 9:1-7; Titus 3:3-7; Luke 2:1-20

Prayer for Illumination

Ever-present God, Gracious Father, who from the womb of the Virgin Mary brought new life to all humanity; Grant to us your Holy Spirit, that hearing your Word we might receive it by faith, and thereby be born again, born from on high, and so be your sons and daughters for eternity. Through Jesus Christ, Son of Mary, Son of God. Amen.

Hughes Oliphant Old

Christmas is Here!

Christmas is here! The Long Wait is over! Finally we get to open the presents that have been wrapped under the tree and have been driving us crazy. Finally we get to enjoy the delicious feast that mothers have been preparing. And here in Alaska we even get the bonus of a white Christmas – says one for whom this is not usual. And we have a whole day of festivities surrounded by our family. What a wonderful time!

Christmas and Advent are wonderful seasons for the holiday cheer they bring. More profoundly, they are wonderful seasons for highlighting God's faithfulness to His people. All through Advent, and again tonight, we remember the hope of the gospel, first declared to Adam and repeated in every generation for 4,000 years. It was a long wait! Adam lived for 930 years – long enough to see the fruits of his sin as violence began to cover the earth. A thousand years later the whole earth was such a social cesspool, that God cleansed it with a flood and restarted the human race with Noah. God instituted human government to slow the progress of sin, yet once again wickedness grew across the earth, until by the time Augustus ruled the Mediterranean world, the earth was again filled with violence and ravaged by demons.

Immediately after Adam's horrible sin, God promised to send a child who would rescue the human race from the terrors of sin and Satan. Adam and Eve would die, but not before they produced a child who would save them. For 4,000 years every generation looked for that child. All this time God promised through His prophets that He had not forgotten his people. God spoke to Abraham and Moses and David and Isaiah and hundreds of other prophets that He would come and save the world. So God's people waited. And waited and waited and waited. God had not forgotten them. Everything was going according to God's sovereign plan, as He prepared the earth to receive His Son. The Apostle Paul explains, "when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." When everything was ready, when God's plan was completed, when the times were filled up, a child was born who would save the world. Help had arrived!

Tonight we celebrate that magical night 2,000 years ago when God was born as a man – a baby. The wonder of the incarnation is that God became man without ceasing to be God. The child Savior that Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph had longed for had finally come! The hope of all the ages, the longing of all the earth, the desire of nations had arrived! Of course the angels sang! It would have been criminal to hush them. It would have been impossible to hush them! For this was the hinge of history. This was the salvation of the world! Help had arrived!

But this child was not what faithful Jews were expecting. They were expecting a powerful warrior to deliver them from the harsh Romans. They were expecting a majestic king who would restore Jerusalem to the glories of kings David and Solomon. They were expecting a righteous ruler who would drive the wicked from the land and make Israel truly righteous. Instead they got a baby. A poor baby. I am sure baby Jesus was cute, as all babies are – but he was not powerful or majestic or observably righteous. And he was poor.

The most faithful, most righteous, most godly people missed it. They, who were looking and longing for the Savior, failed to grasp that God was doing something more wonderful than they ever dreamed. Indeed this baby would deal with the hated Romans and bring glory to Jerusalem. But they would have to wait. They would have to wait for this baby to grow into a man. They would have to wait and hope as He proclaimed the coming Kingdom. They would have to wait during the terrors of death and three dark days in the tomb. They would have to wait for the Holy Spirit. They would have to wait and persevere during the Roman persecutions. But slowly they would see sinners converted, they would see the power of Rome fade, they would see society become less violent, and – with the help of the apostles – followers of Jesus would see that these blessings, amazing as they were, were superficial. The astounding mission of this helpless baby was nothing less than the reconstruction of the human race. God had come in human flesh to condemn sin in the flesh and create a new race of man with Jesus as its founder. From this baby, into all who believe in Him, will flow a powerful righteousness that will bring forth a new heavens and new earth. Help has arrived!

Our epistle lesson reminds us that our salvation depends entirely upon God's mercy, and has nothing to do with any good works that we do. This does not mean that God scorns the good things we do. Not at all! All-knowing God who sees everything we do is pleased when His creatures care for each other. But all the good that we do cannot save us. Only God can save us – if He will. And praise God, His overwhelming mercy drove Him into the womb of Mary, out into the turmoil of society, even to the cross so that we might be reborn and inhabited by the Holy Spirit. We might clean up our morals if we tried real hard, but we can no more rebirth ourselves than we could give birth to ourselves the first time. People are still making the same mistake that these first century Jews made. People still think that God wants us to behave. They think that the essence of Christianity is to do good. False! The essence of Christianity is a new race of people born of the Spirit, of the same nature as Jesus. This is what Jesus was born to do, and this is what He accomplished.

On this Christmas Eve we gather as friends to hear the ancient promises and sing familiar carols, yet we come with burdens small and large. The warmth of our fellowship tonight and the comfort of family tomorrow will ease those burdens, yet they linger. Tonight I proclaim to you peace and joy and hope. Help has arrived! That baby born 2,000 years ago was the child longed for, and He completely changed the world. There is still suffering, so His work is not completed, yet we wait in hope with peace rejoicing. Jesus is with us! Jesus is here to help us through our hardships! Jesus will come again to complete our salvation.

Leave this hall rejoicing that the Christ child came and is with us now. Go into the night knowing that the angels who heralded the birth of Christ are surrounding you and guiding you. Go with the love of our Father God embracing you. Go, for because of Christ, this night is a holy night.

Prayers of the People

On this holy night, let us pray for God to remember the poor and to bring salvation to all the earth. Heavenly Father, thank you for remembering your promises and sending your Son, Jesus our Lord, to save us from our sins.

Thank you, that when the world was full of despair, you sent the Wonderful Counselor to bring us hope.

Save those who are suffering, our Father!

Thank you, that at a time when children were abused and mistreated, you came as a Child to save the weak.

Save the poor and helpless, our Father!

Thank you, that when peace was maintained at the edge of a sword, you came as the Prince of Peace to break the iron grip of oppression.

Save those caught in warfare, persecution, and oppression, our Father!

Thank you, that when the earth was filled with demons, you came with the gospel of salvation.

Save all nations, our Father!

Closing Prayer

Almighty God, who has given us your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and as at this time to be born of a pure virgin; Grant that we being regenerate and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; Through Jesus Christ our LORD, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, throughout all ages. Amen.

C. David Green
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