

Saved!

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church on Christmas Eve, 1992. Scripture Lesson: Titus 3:4-7.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we're back home but I don't want to talk about this building. I want to tell you about Jesus. A little while ago a passage was read from a letter of the Apostle Paul. He wrote, *when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us.* This is the message of Christmas in a nutshell.

God our Savior appeared. That's not something we could discover by looking up at the beautiful winter night sky with its myriad stars, or by looking within ourselves and getting in touch with our feelings, or by just sitting down to think. It's not something we discover by doing good deeds. It's not a universal truth that we know simply by being human. We know that *God, our Savior appeared* only because somebody told us what the Bible says: God our Savior appeared in the Palestinian town of Bethlehem, during the reign of Caesar Augustus, when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

I often hear people say, "I don't need to go to church. I don't need to read the Bible. I can meditate by myself. I try to be good and that's all that matters." Or people say, "I can know God better by looking at a sunset than by going to church." But without the Bible and the church, none of us would know this story: *God our Savior appeared.*

Stories shape how we think, feel and act. The stories my mom, dad, brother and sisters told me have shaped how I think, feel and act. For example, one Christmas story my family tells took place during the great depression, back in the thirties. My family lived in a tiny home without central heating or ^{an indoor} bathroom. My dad had little work. The bills piled up. No money for Christmas gifts that year. My dad did scrape together enough money to buy a ^{scrawny} Christmas tree and my family decorated it on Christmas Eve.

it seems like all my father's friends spoke with accents, Italian, Polish or German.
Now, my father had ^{one} friend ^{though} who was closer than a brother; Izzy, a Jewish liquor store owner who spoke with a Yiddish accent. Izzy showed up that Christmas Eve with a car load of gifts. There were new leather shoes for my two sisters and brother who'd been wearing shoes with cardboard soles. There was a new suit for my dad and a dress for my mother. There was hard candy for everybody. Izzy, a man who didn't even share our Christian faith, came and made the bleak mid-winter glad with Christmas joy.

That happened before I was born. But I've heard that story from the time I was a little boy. My family told me the story. My brother and sister continue to retell that story when we get together. That story, and many others like it, has shaped the way I think, feel and act towards people with accents, Jews, the poor, the unemployed, people of other religious faiths, the poorly housed and, yes, even liquor store owners. The Christmas story is also a family story we tell again and again when we gather on Christmas. Nobody can know it without being told because it happened long ago and far away. One bleak mid-winter *God our Savior appeared; he saved us.* That story shapes the way Christians think, feel and act towards refugees, the homeless, the poor, the weak and helpless. Above all it shapes the way we think, feel and act towards God. In Christ *God our Savior appeared; he saved us.*

Ruth and David Seamands were missionaries in Korea. She tells another Christmas story: It was a dark Christmas Eve in Korea. A pregnant Korean woman in labor walked through the snow to the home of a missionary friend where she knew she could find help. As the young woman stumbled forward, birth pains overcame her. She could go no farther. She crawled under a bridge and gave birth to a baby boy. The child was in danger of freezing but all she had was the heavy padded clothes she was wearing. One

by one she removed the pieces of her clothing and wrapped them around her tiny son like a cocoon. Then, finding a discarded piece of burlap, she pulled it over herself and lay exhausted beside her baby.

The next morning her missionary friend drove across the bridge. Just then her jeep ran out of gas. She got out of the jeep and started to walk across the bridge when she heard a faint cry beneath her. She crawled under the bridge to investigate. There she found the tiny baby, warm but hungry, and the young mother, frozen to death. The missionary took the baby home and adopted him as her own. As the boy grew, he often asked his step-mother to tell him the story of how his mother saved him.

On Christmas day, his 12th birthday, he asked the missionary to take him to his mother's grave. He asked her to wait at a distance while he went to pray. He stood beside the grave and bowed his head, weeping. Then he began to take off his clothes. It was bitterly cold. Piece by piece he took off his clothes and laid them on his mother's grave. He knelt, naked and shivering in the snow and he cried out to the mother he never knew: "Were you colder than this for me, mother?" And he wept bitterly.

Like that Korean mother, God our Savior stripped himself of every royal garment and used them to warm, clothe, and save us. God entered into our world of hatred and cold indifference and died on a cross for no other reason than to save and clothe us in his righteousness.

God saw centuries of broken lives needing a Savior. God saw the sin of human hearts. He saw our sins, yours and mine. He saw the long history of ethnic hatred and religious wars. God saw centuries of starvation and suffering and the worship of false gods. God saw war, bloodshed, crime and greed.

And then the *goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared* to save us. It was when Augustus was the Roman Emperor and Quirinius was governor of Syria. *God our Savior appeared* when Mary gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. Angels appeared to poor shepherds keeping watch over their flocks and told them the story for the very first time: To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior.

The good news of Christmas prompted the shepherds to respond personally. They set off to find Christ. This Christmas Eve that same story; that same good news calls us to respond personally. You've seen this new building. You've heard the Christmas story. You've heard how it can begin to shape how you think, feel and act. You've enjoyed some beautiful music. But if that's all you do, it would be just as if the shepherds merely applauded the angels' performance and did nothing more. Christmas is good news of great joy when, like the shepherds, you get to know Jesus for yourself. Trust that he's your Savior. Believe that in him God our Savior appeared. Turn to him in all your weakness, loneliness, grief, doubt and guilt. Believe he's saved you and worship him as your Lord and God.

You don't have to go to Bethlehem to find him; he's only a prayer away, and he's calling you right now. Within the fellowship of God's family, and through the stories we hear from the Bible every Sunday, he will help you become a different person; a person who can help change this world. He pours out his Spirit on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Amen

Christmas Eve Prayer - 1992

Good, loving and kind God, our Savior; grant that all here this evening may celebrate Christmas by returning humbly and gratefully, with joy and confidence to him in whom you have come to us. Have mercy on all who do not acknowledge you and your kingdom, who may have known you but have long since forgotten, misunderstood or even denied you.

Save us, each one of us, not according to any work of righteousness that we have done, but according to your mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit. Pour out your Spirit on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

We pray for the needs of the whole world: for peace and justice on earth; for the unity and mission of the church for which Christ died; And because Christ particularly loves them, we remember in his name: the poor and helpless; the cold, the hungry and the oppressed; the sick and those who mourn; the lonely and unloved; the aged and little children; all who do not know and love the Lord Jesus Christ. Finally, we remember before you our Father that multitude which no one can number, whose hope was in the Word made flesh, and with whom, in Christ, we are one for evermore.

And now as Christ our Savior taught us, hear us as we humbly pray...

Our Father, who art in heaven; hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.