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Spirit and Life

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Editorial Sigla.—

Notes marked “—Ed.” originate with Andreas Helland, editor of the 1910 volume.

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1 First Sunday in Advent: The Year of the Lord's Favor

Luke 4:16–22. And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and according to his custom he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and stood up to read. And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him, and when he opened the book, he found the place where it was written:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim the Gospel to the poor; he has sent me to heal those who are brokenhearted, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And he closed the book and gave it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them: Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. And all bore witness to him and marveled at the gracious words that proceeded from his mouth.

Will the new church year that begins today become a year of the Lord's favor for our church?

The answer to this question depends on two things. First, whether the Lord, “according to his custom,” will come into our synagogues—that is, our congregations—and there let the Word be proclaimed. Second, whether we give the Word room in our hearts, so that the Word becomes for us a power unto salvation.

Blessed be the Lord, that the year of the Lord's favor, which began with his gracious preaching in Nazareth, has not yet come to an end. From that time it has been the year of the Lord's favor, inasmuch as the Gospel since then has sounded forth in an ever-widening circle. From Sunday to Sunday, from year to year, from century to century, preaching with power from God and the heavenly Spirit has resounded over the earth in thousands upon thousands of places.

Blessed be the Lord, that it still resounds. And that it resounds with its old, simple, and life-giving message. Even if it has at times been darkened and overshadowed by human commandments and human doctrines, it has nevertheless not fallen silent; but as the sun breaks forth again from mist and clouds, so the clear radiance of the Gospel has by the Lord's grace again shone forth. Still the Lord, through his Gospel, offers the kingdom of God with all its grace and gift to the poor; still he offers healing and restoration to broken hearts; still he offers sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed; still he opens his Savior's arms and says: “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.” Grace for every poor sinner, free grace, unmerited grace, remains the sum of the preaching, as it always was. The same old distress that again and again afflicts and presses human hearts can still be relieved by the same old faithful remedy, the precious blood of Jesus, which blots out all our transgressions and atones for all our guilt.

Therefore it has hitherto been the year of the Lord's favor for all of us who dwell in lands that are illumined by the true light of the Gospel, where the Lord's pure Word and blessed Gospel sound forth in the congregation from the mouths of the Lord's faithful witnesses.

But there are also places from which the Lord has removed the lampstand, and where the Gospel no longer sounds. Where now are Nazareth and Capernaum? Where are Jerusalem and Bethlehem? Where are Ephesus and Antioch and Smyrna? Where are even Rome and Alexandria? Therefore, you who have the light, do not be proud, but fear! Thank the Lord, who has allowed you to keep the light; but pray—pray in deepest humility—that he will allow you to keep the light “yet this year.”

And blessed be the Lord, we dare, despite our sins and our lukewarmness, nevertheless believe that he will still, “according to his custom,” come into our synagogues every Sunday and let the Word be read and preached for us. We may say with confidence that the Lord will still spare us, that he will let the new church year be “the year of the Lord’s favor.” He has not forgotten to show mercy, and he will not close the door of grace. Therefore we still proclaim, in faith and in the Spirit of Christ, the year of the Lord’s favor with Word and Baptism and Holy Supper, and with the blessed preaching of Jesus’ witnesses.

But will it also become the year of the Lord’s favor for you? Dear soul, consider this question well. There are so many—so many—who are part of God’s congregation and who take part in much of its work, but who do not share in its joy and blessedness. Why should this be so? If you bear the congregation’s burdens, then also take its goods and joys, and so it will become the year of the Lord’s favor for you.

How can this come to pass? Perhaps you could learn something by simply following our text. Jesus went, “according to his custom, on the Sabbath day into the synagogue.” You should begin with the same custom; perhaps you do not yet have this custom. One often speaks so contemptuously of habitual Christianity, and it is indeed true that it is a poor Christianity. But there are habits that are useful for the Christian life. Among them is this custom of Jesus Christ, to go into the synagogue on the Sabbath day. Follow it in full earnestness in the new church year, and do not let laziness or sluggishness or bad weather hinder you from gathering with God’s congregation in the Lord’s house. And even if the pastor cannot be present in the congregation’s assembly every Sunday, let that not hinder the congregation from gathering for its edification. The Word can indeed be read and work nonetheless.

But it is not accomplished with a good habit alone. If it is to become the year of the Lord’s favor for you, then the question is whether you will become one of the poor and brokenhearted, for whom the Gospel offers peace for the heart. If you go rich and satisfied and cheerful through the new church year, then it will not become better for you than all the other years. If your heart is great and strong and hard and whole, so that the Word finds no room in it, then it will not become otherwise than it has been; for with every day that passes, and with every word you hear without repentance and faith, you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath and of God’s righteous revelation. If the new church year is to become for you a year of the Lord’s favor, then bow, you proud heart, under the Lord’s law that judges your sin; then let Christ’s love melt the ice around the heart, so that you flee broken and poor to the cross and the blood.

Can a sinner then do anything for his salvation, you say. Must he not wait until the Spirit of the Lord seizes him so powerfully that he cannot resist? Must he not wait until a storm of awakening sweeps over land and people? — But have you not heard of him who stands at

the door and knocks? Shall he stand outside even longer? He brings salvation with him; he brings healing with him; he brings peace for the heart and blessedness with him; you can take nothing—absolutely nothing—but you can receive everything from him; oh, open up, open up, that he may come in. Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear! And if you hear rightly, then the Word gives faith and peace and life.

A man stands in the shade and freezes and trembles; a friend comes and says to him: “On the other side there is sunshine and warmth—go there.” And the man goes; he perhaps does not perceive any effect of the sun at once; but if he waits a little while, then the warmth of the sun begins to do him good. Have you tried the same with God’s Gospel? You go to church a single time; you leaf casually through your Bible; you perceive nothing. But remain standing in the light; give the Word time; hear it diligently and read it yet more diligently, and it shall itself plow the ground and break the stone crust and lay living seed down in the field of the heart. Let it be watered with tears and weeping over your own hardness, and the seed shall grow the better. Pray, and wait in faith and hope, and the year of the Lord’s favor shall also become your own year of favor, your day of salvation and the times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord.

May the Lord grant us a blessed church year with new glad tidings for our sorrowing and wounded hearts.

2 First Day of Christmas: A Great Joy

Luke 2:1–14. And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This first enrollment took place when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. And it came to pass, while they were there, that the days were fulfilled for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her son, the firstborn, and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were shepherds in the same region out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, the angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. And the angel said to them: Do not fear! For behold, I proclaim to you a great joy, which shall come to all the people; for to you is born this day a Savior, who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David. And this shall be the sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, among people his good pleasure.

It is written of the shepherds on the fields of Bethlehem that “they were greatly afraid” when the angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them.

Why were they afraid? And do you also fear, O heart, when the light of the Lord shines around you? What is it that you fear?

He who has experienced it knows well what it is that makes a human heart so fearful and anxious when the light of the Lord breaks in and it becomes bright as day within. And many, many who have not allowed the light of the Lord to shine into the heart know very well why they do not dare open the door of the heart to the light and the day.

Oh, how carefully they strive to keep it dark in the closed chamber of the heart, so that it may not be revealed how things truly look within. They sense how badly things stand; they keep it dark so that naked reality may not laugh them in the face. They do not want to see it themselves, and when it is too dark for their own eye, they so easily deceive themselves with the false comfort: No one sees it; God does not see it!

But “the Lord sees,” it is written.

Foolish person, open the door of the heart, that the Lord’s light may break in. It is better that you be cast down in fear and terror when the light comes in, than that you try in vain to shut it out.

Futile? Yes, futile; for even if it should succeed for a short while to shut out the light of grace, it will be utterly futile when the light becomes a consuming fire of wrath.

O, if you tremble before the glory of the Lord, my poor heart—open up, open up! If you think with a half-suppressed sigh of Christmas as it comes, of the Gospel as it sounds, of the child in the manger, of Mary in the stable, of the shepherds in the fields—if you think: If only I were a child again, that I might rejoice as before—open up, open up to the light of the Lord!

Your heart is in trouble, but open up, open up to the light of the Lord, and there is still hope.

For what is it that you lack? It is the coldness of the world, it is the darkness of doubt, it is the burning fog of reason, it is the misery of sin that fills the heart. They are enemies of your joy and peace and blessedness that have pressed in and settled inside the heart. Let only the light of the Lord shine in, so that the nature of the enemies may be made known, and you may see the corruption they have wrought.

And when you then in terror must cry out: my sin, my sin! then comes the angelic message: Do not fear, the Savior is here! a great joy shall come to you this day.

A great joy? Yes indeed, a great joy—heavenly delight, the joy of children and the jubilation of angels.

For a Savior is born to you; “he shall save his people from their sins.” For this reason he has come into the world; for this reason he comes to you.

If your old sins weigh upon you, he will forgive them. If you think you are so unclean and filthy and ragged and torn that you dare not come before God—oh see, it is but a little child who stretches out his arms toward you and smiles at you; he does not take account of what you have been, where you have gone, how wretched and miserable you have become, if only you will now receive the little child and give him room with you.

Then you shall experience joy, joy as never before. For if you took the child Jesus into heart and home, then it was God’s life and love you gave room within you. There came new life, there came new joy. You experienced that all the old has passed away and all has become new.

Is that the great joy? Yes, it is the only pure and perfect joy that a human heart can experience here on earth. When all the old, all sin, all sorrow, all distress is sunk into the depths of eternal mercy; when all old anxious memories are taken away; when all uncleanness is washed away in the blood of Jesus; when you are permitted to begin life anew without any oppressive guilt, without any constricting fear, without any gnawing resentment, and you may live saved and free in the bright day of grace—then there is joy, heavenly joy in a human soul.

But there are few who taste this joy fully and completely. And yet it is precisely therein that the glory of the Christian faith proves itself in all its fullness.

It seems so small to the world to go to the manger in Bethlehem; it seems so contemptible in the eyes of the world to become a child again; it seems so impossible for one who is old to be born anew; and yet it is precisely this that is the glad message of Christmas: “A son is born to us, a child is given to us.”

Our reason says: Let us become better people, let us become more rational, wiser, more calculating, more cautious people.

Our conscience, inflamed by God's law, says: Become righteous, become holy, become good!

But God's Gospel says: Come to the manger of Jesus and become a child again!

That is the great joy. That is the new thing which God has done, and which fills our mouth with jubilation and our tongue with laughter: new life, eternal life, imperishable life given by God in his own Son, given to everyone who believes in the Son.

It seems so offensive to our old fleshly reason. And yet, if you are to receive an eternal life, does it make any sense to try to transform your old, perishable life into eternal life by your works?

Can an old garment become new by having ever so many patches sewn onto it?

Can perishability ever become anything other than perishability, no matter how greatly you exert yourself?

But either you must receive an eternal life as a free, undeserved gift from God, or you can never, never attain it.

And here the gift is given; here is the true God and eternal life. Come and see! Come and take the child into your heart in living faith, and you yourself shall be born anew.

Is that possible? Ah no, for a human being this is impossible; but remember what was said of the child Jesus: For God nothing is impossible.

If you believe this miracle, then the miracle has already taken place in your own heart. Then you yourself are a child of God, born anew by the miraculous power of God.

That is true and living Christianity.

Come, let us go with the shepherds and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us, and there shall be great joy in our hearts.

Joy is so greatly lacking in our Christianity because simple faith in Christ is so greatly lacking. Oh, that it might become better with us all at this Christmas feast! Let us then open the doors of our hearts wide and let the light of the Lord shine in; and when we are terrified over all our sin, all our self-love, all our unbelief, all our pride, all our self-righteousness, then let us also take the child Jesus in, and his holy love shall blot out sin and kindle the new heavenly love within, and we shall receive

a great joy.

3 Twenty-fourth Sunday after Trinity: They knew neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.

Luke 20:27–40. Then some of the Sadducees, who deny that there is any resurrection, came to him and questioned him, saying, ‘Teacher, Moses prescribed for us that if a man’s brother dies, having a wife, and he dies childless, his brother shall take the wife and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife and died childless; and the second took the wife, and he also died childless; and the third took her, and likewise all seven; they left no children and died. Last of all the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as wife.’ And Jesus said to them, ‘The children of this world marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy to attain that world and the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. But that the dead are raised, even Moses indicated, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him.’ And some of the scribes answered and said, ‘Teacher, you have spoken well.’ For they dared not ask him anything further.

The Sadducees were of that kind of people whose religion essentially amounted to the denial of the resurrection. Just as in our own day there are those who deny that Jesus is God, always ready to dispute and to use their supposed learning to demonstrate that Jesus is never expressly called God in Scripture, so the Sadducees, with their worldly wisdom, were always prepared to prove that Moses teaches nothing about the resurrection of the dead; and thus their entire religion consisted essentially in the denial of this doctrine of God.

This suited the creaturely life they led very well, to be able to convince themselves and others that there is no life after this one, that they have no accountability, and to encourage one another in the service of their belly with these words: ‘Eat, drink, and be glad, for tomorrow we shall die.’

They also believed they had very strong arguments, and thought they demonstrated their superiority when they could dispute with Jesus about the resurrection.

But it went with them as with most other theological disputants. With all their sharp-witted learning, they were ignorant of the main thing, of the catechism, so to speak; they knew neither the Scriptures nor the power of God (Mark 12:24). Whoever seriously applies himself to these two will have better things to do than to dispute.

A man who was not in every respect faithful to the truth wished to have an excuse and a defense for his falsehood. He thought that if he could first prove that an emergency lie was justified, then he could himself decide when a lie was an emergency lie.

He said to a friend: ‘A madman with an axe in his hand was pursuing another and stopped where the street divided in two, not knowing which way the pursued man had gone. There

he met another person and said to him, “Tell me which way my enemy went, or I will kill you.” What should this person do? If he keeps silent, he himself will be killed; if he tells the truth, the other will be killed. Was it not necessary here to use an emergency lie?”

The friend replied: ‘I will answer yes, if you will promise me never to speak an untrue word until the above-mentioned situation occurs.’

Jesus, however, answered the Sadducees in a far more earnest and considerate manner, when they, in order to create a semblance of proof for their denial of the resurrection, rooted in the flesh, produced an equally unreasonable story about the woman and the seven brothers who had been married to her.

He did not engage in their foolish and dishonest example. As was his custom, he went straight at their hearts and spiritual condition.

You Sadducees, he would say, deny the resurrection of the dead, and the reason is not that you possess any sound proof for doing so; the reason is that in your carnality and spiritual blindness you know neither the power of God nor the Scriptures.

If you knew the power of God and were not so clouded by your own sensuality, then you would know that life in this world and life in the world to come are two entirely different things. In this world, life—even the very best—is bodily, corruptible, and mortal. Since we all must die here, and since God’s plans of salvation could not be realized without the continuation of the human race, the Lord from the beginning gave this command: ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.’ Therefore it belongs to life in this world to marry and to give in marriage.

But there, where God has revealed his power in a man and raised him from the dead, there begins a life in Spirit, in incorruptibility and immortality. Then death is swallowed up in victory, and the man can no longer die, but becomes like the angels, with a transfigured, glorified body, whose nourishment is the vision of the Lord’s face. There they neither marry nor are given in marriage, because each has an eternal existence of his own.

But neither do you know the Scriptures, despite your imagined learning. You strain out the gnat and swallow the camel. The most important thing escapes your blinded eye. For it stands written in Moses, in a well-known place, that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Can the living God be God of dead people? Then Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who are dead, must, according to Scripture’s own testimony, be risen to new life. ‘Therefore you are greatly mistaken.’

No wonder that both the people and the Pharisees marveled at his simplicity and authority, and that from that time on they did not dare to ask him anything further.

Friend, you are not like the Sadducees? You do not dare to deny that there is a life after this; you still believe in the resurrection of the dead, and you do well. But have you also considered what the resurrection of the dead means for you?

Do you know the Scriptures and the power of God?

Do you know that the Son of Man has been given authority to carry out judgment, and that the hour is coming when all who are in the graves will hear the voice of the Son of God and come forth—those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment (John 5:24–29)?

Thus the Scripture sounds, and thus the power is exercised.

Friend, are you prepared?”