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## **Spirit and Life**

(Aand og Liv)

Sermons on the Gospels of All Three Lectionary Cycles

(Prædikener over Alle tre Tekstrækkers Evangelier)

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Editorial Sigla.—

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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 Second Sunday in Advent: The Kingdom of God Comes

Luke 17:20–30 But when he was asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of God would come, he answered them and said: The Kingdom of God does not come in such a way that one can point to it. Neither will they say, See here, or see there! For behold, the Kingdom of God is within you. But he said to the disciples: The days will come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. And they will say to you, See here, or see there! Do not go out, and do not follow them. For just as the lightning flashes from one end of heaven to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. But first he must suffer much and be rejected by this generation. And as it was in the days of Noah, so it will also be in the days of the Son of Man: they ate, they drank, they married and were given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise also, as it was in the days of Lot: they ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they built; but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all; so it will be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed.

Few things are as deeply misunderstood—or as thoroughly filled with alien, carnal content shaped by human sinful desire—as this word: the Kingdom of God.

The pope seized both spiritual and temporal power over all Europe and called it “the Kingdom of God.” The Mormons in our own days have founded a society in which outward power, the Word of God, and sensual desire are shamefully mingled together, and they do not hesitate to call it the Kingdom of God. The individual often pursues honor and power by means of the Word and the congregation, and yet seeks to persuade both himself and others that he does it for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

No wonder, then, that the Pharisees also had their concept of “the Kingdom of God.” By this they meant a kingdom at once spiritual and earthly, like that of David, only far greater in extent, power, and glory—a kingdom such as the papal church later attempted to realize: a world-kingdom in which the Jews would sit upon the thrones of dominion with all nations under their feet. And this kingdom, they thought, would come fully completed with the Messiah.

Naturally, then, Jesus—despite his blessed words of life and his divine miracles—was not much to the Pharisees’ liking, when in his simple, poor outward appearance there was nothing that promised them visible glory and power, but rather the opposite: mockery and affliction. If he were the Messiah, then they were disappointed in what they believed to be expectations grounded in the Word of God, concerning a king upon David’s throne; they therefore preferred to see in him a deceiver and a mocker of Israel’s rightful hope.

With such an earthly understanding of “the Kingdom of God,” they came to him and asked: “When does it come?”

He knew well that his own disciples, then as now, are only too inclined to share, to a greater

or lesser extent, the Pharisees' earthly expectations with regard to the manifestation of the Kingdom of God in the world; and he therefore directed his answer partly to the Pharisees, partly to his own disciples. We will consider them together.

In two respects, he says—and he speaks not only to them, but also to us—**you have misunderstood and overturned the concept of the Kingdom of God. First, you have forgotten that it is spiritual, and that its visible manifestation in the world is not in glory, but in lowliness. Secondly, that it indeed will one day also be revealed in outward majesty and glory, but that then it will not become dominion over the world, but judgment upon the world. This is to be considered.**

“The Kingdom of God,” he says, “does not come so that one can point to it.” The word that stands in the original text, and which cannot easily be rendered by an equivalent word, indicates that the Kingdom of God, in its proper meaning, does not have such visible boundary-marks with regard to extent or nature, that one could either with the bodily eye or with fleshly reason recognize them, point to them for others, and say: “here the Kingdom of God reaches, and no further; upon this visible thing the true Christianity depends, and upon nothing else.”

Just as little as circumcision, despite the Jews' false trust in it, set any real boundary between those who belonged to the Kingdom of God and those who were outside, just as little can anyone rightly say: “all who live in a Christian country belong to the Kingdom of God,” or “all who belong to the congregation are in the Kingdom of God,” or “all who agree with us belong to the Kingdom of God.” For the Kingdom of God has no such visible or sensible boundaries; it is rather something within us, something spiritual: a living relation between each soul and the living God through the Savior, Jesus Christ—a relation which, by its very nature, stands opposed to all that is merely sensible and perishable. Therefore the Kingdom of God, in this sense, however hard it is for flesh and blood to acknowledge it, and however gladly we would evade it by making a compromise with the world, is nevertheless always in affliction, persecution, and lowliness. And insofar as the Kingdom of God, as it is on earth, must nevertheless also appear in an earthly form, with external organizations, buildings, and the like, all this is only the accidental and the transient, which, like the human body itself, will be brought to nothing; while that which is “within”—the power of the Spirit in the Word and the Sacraments, the life and fellowship in the Son and the Father—will only then shine forth in its full heavenly splendor, when all that is perishable and external has been stripped away.

But precisely on account of this opposition between the spiritual nature of the Kingdom of God and all that is earthly and perishable, on account of the afflictions and the unceasing struggle and persecution to which the Kingdom of God is exposed, there is also in all God's children an unceasing sigh to see Christ again bodily and glorified, with majestic power in his hand to strike down the enemies and to establish his kingdom of glory here on earth.

“Guard yourselves against these voices and such temptations within you and around you,” the Lord says—and he says it especially to his disciples—“guard yourselves therefore; and when someone points to Christ here or there, then do not go out. For the Kingdom of God is always here below on earth something “within you,” not something that can be identified by

outward power or glory. Guard yourselves therefore; for this is the leaven of the Pharisees."

The Kingdom of God must always be in lowliness, and just as Christ himself first had to suffer much and be rejected, so must his body, which is the congregation—the Kingdom of God on earth—first suffer and be rejected; and then comes the glory, then comes Jesus, the carpenter's son from Nazareth, in his full divine majesty and power.

"Yes," he says to the Pharisees, "the Kingdom of God, such as you expect it, will indeed in its time also come—but woe to you when it comes." The Lord does not delay, he says to his disciples, in coming; he comes in his time. But be ready when he comes! Remember Lot's wife. For when Christ is revealed in his glory with the hosts of angels around him, then he comes in the clouds for judgment.

For judgment.

Swiftly like the lightning that flashes from one end of the earth to the other—and terrifyingly.

Unexpected and unforeseen he comes with his kingdom, when the great mass of humanity, as in the days of Noah and of Lot, has sunk into spiritual sleep and undisturbed enjoyment of all the goods of earthly life—when love has grown cold and faith has faded upon the earth—when there is crying, Peace, peace! and human beings rejoice and mirror themselves in the Kingdom of God which, with the mind of the Pharisees, they themselves have built by earthly power and strength; then the Son of Man stands there unawares like the lion over the sleeping one, and the humanity which just now was eating and drinking and delighting itself in its sensuality lies at once upon its knees under wailing lament and unspeakable terror, and hides its face so as not to see the Son of Man.

Thus, you Pharisees and you heedless disciples, who so gladly would remove the cross and serve both God and Mammon: the Kingdom of God comes, and it comes soon.

But are you also ready to receive it?

Have you remembered Lot's wife?

### 3 Third Sunday of Advent: The Way of the Lord

Luke 3:1–6. In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the land of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. And he went throughout the whole region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough ways shall become smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

When the Lord comes to his people, the question is whether his way is prepared for him, or whether the people are prepared, so that they are a people made ready for the Lord.

This preparation of the way and of the people was so necessary that the prophet Isaiah had already proclaimed that a crying voice should sound in the wilderness before the coming of the Lord; and it was foretold by the prophet Malachi that the messenger of the Lord should come before him, to prepare the way before his face; and again, that Elijah should come before the day of the Lord’s coming, so that the day might not become a curse instead of salvation.

And of John it was said, before he was born, that he would be this forerunner, this crying voice, this preparer of the people in the spirit and power of Elijah.

And in our text it is told that John himself, in the wilderness, received the word of the Lord. We do not know how the Lord spoke to John; nor is that of any importance; but we know both that it was the Lord himself who called him, and we know that it was in order to prepare the way of the Lord, and so that the coming Messiah might be revealed to Israel, that he was called.

And John walked the hard path of the divine calling, which led him to death. He went to the secure and defiant Israel and preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. In this way he was to prepare the way of the Lord; in this way he was to make people ready for the Lord.

But did Israel then need preparation? This chosen people of the Lord, with the Law and the Prophets, with the light of the Word and the call of the Spirit—did it need preparation for the coming of the Lord? They were indeed “children of Abraham” and “children of the promise”; the kingdom of God had been promised to them, the Messiah had been promised to them; and now they had waited so long and suffered so much—should they still need preparation? Were they not ready to receive the Lord, who would bring them vengeance upon their enemies and restore to them the glory of David? Would they not gladly see the day of the Lord and rejoice to meet their deliverer?

Alas, alas, Israel was not ready to meet its God; Israel was not prepared to receive the

kingdom of heaven. Their mind was earthly and fleshly; with anxious expectation they looked for improvement in their earthly conditions, for earthly glory, for worldly power and freedom. But the kingdom of heaven was not the longing and desire of the heart. Therefore the messenger of the Lord had to go before his face and cry: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!” Turn your hearts from the world to God, from the earth to heaven; for it is not the kingdom of David, but the kingdom of God that is coming; not an earthly kingdom, but the heavenly kingdom that is coming. It is not “all the kingdoms of the world and their glory” that are to be given to fleshly hearts for sensual enjoyment; but it is the kingdom of heaven that comes to broken hearts with heavenly peace and healing. It is a kingdom that no one can see unless he is born again of water and the Spirit.

And John, who knew his people’s insatiable desire for the glory of the world, and who knew that the Lord does not give his people a sensual and perishable happiness, but an eternal and imperishable glory, stepped forward with the preaching that the Lord himself had laid in his heart in the solitude of the wilderness. He came to his people and preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Thus the way of the Lord was to be prepared; thus the valleys were to be filled and the hills leveled; thus the crooked was to become straight and the rough to become smooth.

### **Is the same still needed?**

**Yes, precisely the same is still needed for the whole people and for every individual soul.**

Why do the people struggle against one another in our land? Why is the bondage so great and the zeal so burning and the struggle so hard and the envy so bitter? Is it for a heavenly glory and for a heavenly crown that they fight and run and rush so eagerly? Or is it not far more earthly advantage and happiness and power that are pursued with such insatiable desire? Stop for a moment and consider! Look at the teeming crowd around you and ask what all these are seeking. But ask above all after the desire and longing of your own heart. Is it not earthly, is it not sensual?

What voice is it that presses among us? It is the voice of John, which should sound over city and countryside, into house and home, into heart and soul: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!” It is repentance that is needed among us. It is a baptism of repentance that we require, in order to escape the judgment of the Lord, in order to become a people prepared for the Lord.

The Lord is still coming to us; are our hearts ready to receive him? We speak of building a free church of free congregations; we speak of a renewal of God’s church among us; and this is indeed a coming of the Lord, a day of favor, one of the days of the Son of Man for us. Are we also a people ready for the Lord, so that he can use us in his service? Oh, it is time for the voice of John to sound among us: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!” It is time to go to the river Jordan and confess our sins and receive a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Will you not do it now, while it is the time of visitation?

We speak of unity and of peace in God’s church; we rejoice with joy toward the good days that are to dawn. Let us take care that we do not err. The good days are the days of the

Lord, and they do not become our days unless we open to him who stands at the door and knocks, and say to him: “You blessed of God, come in!”

We speak of Christmas and Christmas joy, of gladness and peace, of angel song and heavenly jubilation. Then it is time to turn the heart from the world to God, from the earth to heaven. Then it is time for sorrow and brokenness and humility before the face of the Lord; then it is time to “repent and turn again, that our sins may be blotted out, and that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.”

Then we shall see the salvation of God; then our hearts shall rejoice with imperishable joy.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!

## 4 Fourth Sunday in Advent: Four Witnesses

John 5:31–39. “If I bear witness of myself, my witness is not true; there is another who bears witness of me, and I know that the witness he bears of me is true. You sent messengers to John, and he bore witness to the truth. Yet I do not receive witness from a human being; but I say this so that you may be saved. He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light. But I have a witness greater than John’s; for the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, these works that I do, bear witness of me that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness of me. You have neither ever heard his voice nor seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe him whom he has sent. You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness of me.”

The Jews wished to kill Jesus, not because he had healed the sick man at the pool of Bethesda, but, as they said, because he had done it on a Sabbath.

The Lord took this as an occasion to show that his work was not bound by the Sabbath, because he was the Son of God and worked as the Father works until now. Therefore, instead of wishing to kill him, they were obligated to honor him as the Father—especially since they ought to remember that the Father has given all judgment to the Son, in time and in eternity.

These were heavy and perilous words for one to utter who in every respect appeared like any other human being; therefore he sets witnesses before the Jews, so that they might have no excuse.

The first is John the Baptist. The Jews had indeed made much of him. For a time at least he suited their expectations and aroused great hopes among them through his strict life, his prophetic appearance, and his earnest preaching of repentance. All Jerusalem and Judea had gone out to him. He had borne witness to Jesus and said: “Behold the Lamb of God, who bears the sin of the world.”

Should they not receive his witness gladly? As long as it was new and sensational, they rejoiced in it as in a burning and shining lamp, in the hope that something great for them would come of it. But when they began to take seriously what he preached—repentance and conversion and a suffering Savior—and when they saw that he himself had to lose his life for a king’s whim, they turned their backs on his holy words.

The Lord wishes to remind them of their faithlessness and the wavering of the heart, not because he needs John’s witness, but because it might perhaps bring them to reflection.

For he himself has a greater witness: the works that his Father had given him to accomplish, and which had taken place before the eyes of all the people, according to the Lord’s own words, which he sent to John in prison: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame leap, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the gospel is preached to the poor.”

And how did the Jews answer when the Lord had done these wonders and pointed to them?  
Give us a sign!

They would not repent.

Jesus had another witness: the Father himself, as John had heard it at Jesus' baptism and proclaimed it, and as the apostles were allowed to hear it on the Mount of Transfiguration: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; listen to him!"

Did they listen to him? Alas, no; they answered: You are a Samaritan and have a demon; they would not listen to the Father either.

Therefore Jesus finally brings forward a last witness to them and against them: the Word of God, the Scriptures. "You search the Scriptures," he says, "you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is precisely these that bear witness of me and say: whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; but whoever does not believe in the Son does not have life, but the wrath of God remains over him." Did they bow under this witness? Alas, no; they did not have God's word abiding in them; they did not believe in him whom God has sent.

And now all you who are baptized with Christ's baptism and called by his name, what are these four witnesses concerning the Son of God for us? Have they bent our hearts or hardened them as the hearts of the Jews?

Perhaps you have been cast upon a sickbed, perhaps struck and paralyzed by some great sorrow, by deserved or undeserved misfortune; a lightning bolt has struck down before you as for Luther, death has opened its jaws toward you; a voice has sounded to you: "You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you! Repent while it is called today!" You were unspeakably terrified in your soul; you awoke from the sleep of sin with dread; you saw your sin, your evil corrupted heart, as you had never seen it before, and the judgment of hell stood painted before you. On the one side it sounded: "The axe is already laid at the root of the tree; every tree that does not bear good fruit shall be cut down and cast into the fire," on the other: "Behold the Lamb of God, who bears the sin of the world!"

But where have these voices and cries gone now? Where do you stand? That was John's witness; have you cast them all behind your back?

Yet strange works have taken place all around you; hard, resistant sinners have been converted to God and born again; they have abandoned the way of sin and vice and have learned a new song, a song of praise; they have received new sight and a new heart; they have begun to proclaim the great works of God and to love their neighbor with Christ's love; the old has passed away, and everything has become new; the gospel has been preached to the poor.

Has this too passed your heart untouched, without working anything other than a harder heart—oh, then remember the judgment of the Jewish people.

Or has the Father himself spoken to you?

Had you come so far that you were allowed to hear and appropriate in childlike faith this word: "Take courage, your sins are forgiven you," and did you receive witness from God's Spirit in your spirit that you were a child of God and had the right to cry: Abba, Father?

Oh, where are you now? Have you remained standing in this blessed state of grace with daily access to the throne of grace in the Son, or have you even cast this witness from you, so that the last has become worse for you than the first?

But perhaps you still search the Scriptures; you have preserved the outward Christian life; you go to the Lord's table and to his house; you listen Sunday after Sunday to the Word of God and read it at home both morning and evening. But it strikes your heart and does not enter—a heart that has grown harder year after year. The sharpest arrows of the Law fall blunted against the hard wall of your heart, and the sweetest tones of the Gospel pass unnoticed by your soul. Oh, what a condition, when even the witness of God's Word loses its power! when it was "Hosanna!" yesterday and is "Crucify!" today! What a Christmas season for the one who not only with coldness and indifference, but even with contempt, looks upon the little child Jesus lying in the manger, the Word who became flesh in order to save us!

But praise be to the Lord! still it is the day of grace, still it is Advent time; once again the Lord stretches out his arms and says: "Come here, that I may save you! do not cast my words behind your back!"

What kind of Christmas shall it be for you?

## 5 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.

## 6 Second Day of Christmas: The Pain of Christmas and the Joy of Christmas

John 1:1–14. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not grasp it. There was a man sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness to the light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light. This was the true light, which enlightens every human being coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, and the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own did not receive him. But to all who received him, he gave authority to become children of God, to those who believe in his name; who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory, glory as of the only-begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

The angels proclaimed great joy to the shepherds, and added: “It shall be for all the people.” Today’s text shows us why the joy is so great that angels must sing it out over the earth. The child who is born to us, the Son who is given to us, the child in the manger, is “mighty God, everlasting Father” (Isaiah 9:6). The text also shows why not all people receive the joy that God intended to grant to “all the people.”

The Word, the Word of life, is the gospel contained in Christ himself, or the complete and all-sufficient, all-embracing revelation of God’s eternal being and his infinite love. Christ is the gospel, for in him the glory of God is revealed, so that all flesh may see it, that glory which is full of grace and truth.

What believers in the Old Testament saw only dimly in a mirror, that God was a Father with a father’s love for all his children, Christ revealed when he himself became a small, poor child among human beings, when he became like us in all things except sin, so that we, through faith, might become wholly like him.

How infinitely great this Jesus is, even when he lies as a small child in the manger! He is God from eternity. He was with God, and he was God, in heavenly glory before the foundation of the world was laid. And when the world was created, he was the one through whom all things came into being; nothing came into being, and nothing could come into being, apart from this Son who has now come down to the earth and become one of us. He commanded heaven and earth to come into being; he caused the sun to roll across the heavens; he set the stars upon their appointed paths. Infinite is he in power and wisdom from eternity to eternity. In him the Father’s being had its true image, and God’s glory its radiance. Therefore the Father spoke to him and said: Let us make a human being in our image, after our likeness. He was all that the human race was meant to be according to God’s purpose, and infinitely much more.

But sin entered the world; mankind tore itself loose from him who was its life and its light. Then humanity's true life was shattered; then its light was extinguished. In death and darkness, with blinded heart and wandering spirit, the poor human race wandered over the earth, groping for a way it could not find, striving for a goal it could not reach.

And yet the light was there, even though humanity had closed its heart and eyes to it. It was God's eternal Word, which shone and gleamed like "a light in a dark place" through Abraham and Moses and all the prophets. Throughout the whole time of the Old Testament there was a dawn-glow of the coming sun, which shone across the dark earth and called and beckoned to human souls. But they had turned their backs on the rising sun; they stared and stared at the shadows that lay across the earth, and they kept the darkness in their eyes and in their souls, although it was only necessary to turn around in order to see "the light from on high," which shone through the Word in the mouths of the prophets.

The darkness did not comprehend the light; the eternal, blessed light of God was shut out, and human beings walked in their worldly thoughts and desires, in the impurity and wickedness of their hearts, in pagan idolatry and abomination, or in Jewish self-righteousness and self-deification. Darkness closed in everywhere, and hearts did not find the way back to God and his radiant kingdom.

Then came John the Baptist. God sent him so that he might bear witness to the light, point to the Savior, and say to all people: Behold the Lamb of God! For light and life for sinners were to be found only with the Savior who laid down his life for them, just as the lambs died for Israel's firstborn in Egypt. John was to bear witness so that the worldly-minded might turn back before the Lord came, and believe in him who came with salvation for all who seek salvation, but with crushing judgment for all who loved darkness more than light.

The forerunner did his work, and how much fruit it bore was shown best when the Lord himself came. For a few—oh, all too few—John became a faithful guide who with joy led souls to their heavenly bridegroom; but most paid no heed to it. They perhaps rejoiced for a little while in his light, and then returned to their daily routines and their worldly life.

The Son of God came to God's people, and he found resistance, indifference, unbelief, contempt, hatred, persecution, and death. He came to his own, and his own did not receive him.

What infinite pain lies in these words. It is the sorrow that has followed the gospel from the very beginning. Those who ought to have been the first to receive the Savior, those who said they had waited so long for him, were the first to reject him. "Oh that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people," says the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 9:1). And Jesus himself wept over Jerusalem and said: Oh, if you had known on this your day what serves for your peace, but now it is hidden from your eyes. Thus sorrow also accompanies the joyful Christmas message; and it was not long before the angels' song of praise on the fields of Bethlehem was replaced by "weeping and loud lamentation," when the little children were murdered in Bethlehem by the cruel King Herod, who sought Jesus in order to kill him.

As then, so now. The gospel is met with resistance, contempt, and unbelief in the midst of a

dead Christendom. For most, Christmas brings no joy in Jesus and no song of thanksgiving for the wondrous child in the manger; no, for the vast majority who are called by the Christian name, Christmas is a time of worldly joy and sinful revelry, by which the life in God is often killed in the hearts of many young people. Still today God's Word continually utters this heart-rending complaint over God's people:

**He came to his own, and his own did not receive him.**

Therefore all true Christians also feel a living pain precisely at Christmas over the dreadful indifference and worldliness within Christendom. Can it not become otherwise? Must God's grace in the Son always meet with such resistance from sluggish, rigid, and defiant human hearts? Wake up, then, as you ought, you congregation of God; wake up, you worldly soul who sleeps so heavily in sin; and Christ, the light from on high, will shine upon you and lead you into God's peace and God's blessedness.

For truly there is joy, true and real joy at Christmas for those who receive him. It is not with Jesus as it is with other people. You receive them, you may have a pleasant time with them for a while, and when they leave you again there is perhaps a sense of loss for a little time, and then the waves of forgetfulness close over them, and it has no further significance for you that you met them. But with Jesus it is different. If he is truly received by a human heart, received with the whole distress and need of a grace-hungry, salvation-seeking heart, received as only one receives who has learned to hunger for love and receives it for the first time, then there also comes a great and joyful transformation in such a person.

Receive Jesus, and there will be a change in you that has significance for time and eternity. You become a child of God. No one can open the heart to Jesus with the broken soul's longing for relief and salvation without the Savior also granting salvation and life. Where he enters, he brings his grace and his gift with him, and his gift is God's own eternal life. You receive him in the bitter sorrow of repentance, with shame over your sin and yet with such deep longing for his grace; and behold, when he enters your heart, joy streams in like warmth with the sun, and you rejoice with unspeakable jubilation. This is the true joy of Christmas. Only the joy of becoming a child of God is the right and true joy over the child of God, Immanuel. Then he receives his honor and his praise. Then the true Christmas song sounds in the heart, a song that is not completed until you stand saved before the throne of the Lamb among the number of the blessed. You begin to see Jesus' glory as that of the only-begotten from the Father in the moment of time when you become a child of God; and when you one day see him face to face, you will recognize him, because you see the same glory so infinitely much more clearly.

Do you have this experience of being God's child, and do you have this Christmas joy, and do you have this living hope? Then Jesus has become your Savior. Amen.

## 7 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?"