

***Christmas Sermon 2018***

***Saint Mark's Episcopal Church***

***Charleston, South Carolina***

***The Reverend Dr. Philip C. Linder***

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

What a glorious night it is to welcome all of you to Saint Mark's Episcopal Church and the joyful celebration of Christmas! The word "Christmas," came into common usage in 12<sup>th</sup> century England, a combination of the two words: "Christ's Mass." This is the liturgy that celebrates the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, culminating in the reception of the very Body of Christ into our hands and hearts. Whether you are here this evening as a member of this church, a guest of another, or a visitor from very near or very far, this night we are the family of God joined together to pray, sing, break bread, and give thanks for that which God has done for each of us through the birth of the Christ-Child.

We cannot sit here this evening without being surrounded by a whole host of emotions. For me, this will be the first Christmas without my father and the 13<sup>th</sup> without my mother. These emotions may go from sadness to melancholy...from excitement to great joy. We cannot help but remember our loved ones with whom we spent so many Christmases, and the special gifts and memories that they brought to each Christmas, who are now in eternal life in heaven with our Lord. Yet, amidst all these emotions that fill our hearts and perhaps our eyes with tears, this evening let us try to capture the excitement that we had as a child when we could not wait to see what Christmas morning would bring. For on Christmas, God promises each of us the possibility of a new morning filled with hope and new life.

As we began this evening's beautiful service, we prayed in the Collect for Christmas: "O God, you have caused this holy night to shine with the brightness of the true light..." On this very night the true light of God was made visible and offered to all. In that little town of Bethlehem, the world was lit with a new understanding of God and the possibility of a brand-new relationship with one another and God through Jesus Christ. The vision of the prophet Isaiah was realized: "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rest upon his shoulders;

and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Isaiah further proclaimed that the whole of humanity who had walked in darkness had it lifted by the light of Jesus— “on them light has shined.” But even Isaiah, inspired by God, could not have imagined the prophetic magnitude of his words.

We hear in Luke’s Gospel, “While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she 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.” In Jesus Christ, the very nature of God is revealed to humanity. God becomes humanity, so that we might come closer to fulfilling the intent of being created in the image of God. One of my Christian heroes, Jimmy Carter, in his book, Sources of Strength: Meditations on Scripture for a Living Faith, writes the following: “Yet, this was no ordinary human, but an extraordinary being, full of grace and truth...Isn’t it remarkable to see God coming to Earth in this form? Not as a triumphant ruler, riding a white horse and wearing a crown, leading an army to expel the hated Romans and fulfilling human desires or ambitions, but rather as one who epitomizes unlimited forgiveness, compassion, service, peace, and

love. A man, yet God, who was there when the universe was created, knowing everything, totally powerful.”

Just as remarkable, is that when Mary gave birth to Jesus, she also gave birth to the salvation of God. With Jesus Christ, God’s plan for us was realized—the salvation of God for each of us was fulfilled. God loved us...God knew that we were sinners...Sin separates us from the will and love of God...We cannot save ourselves, no matter how hard we try...So Jesus came to remove the barrier of sin and give us the possibility of living our lives in the present and in eternity with God. We have been given the opportunity of fulfilling the intent of being created “Imago Deo,” in the image of God. What will you do with this great gift of Christmas?

Jimmy Carter went on to write: “The simple but profound fact is that our lives can be changed, beginning now, by professing our faith in Jesus Christ.” What do you have to be excited about this Christmas? My prayer for each of you is that it will be about that possibility...that opportunity. We heard this Christmas Eve, Saint Paul in his Letter to Titus: “For the grace of God has appeared,

bringing salvation to all...” And that same grace enables you and me, and empowers us...pulls us to respond.

If you did not believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, born to Mary and Joseph his step-father more than 2000 years ago in the poor and humble setting of a stable for your salvation, you would not be here this evening. Still, can you get excited enough to carry your faith further so that this Christmas can be life changing? We are very much like those shepherds who received Good News from the angel of that which had already taken place: “To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” The shepherds returned from visiting the baby Jesus, “glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen...” What will your response be? You see, the true test of our encounter with God in Jesus Christ tonight and during this days, is how we respond when this season ends. Will it have made a difference, or will it simply be a fond memory that we capture in photos for social media? Can you open your heart, mind, and the depths of your souls to Jesus, His salvation for you, and what he asks of you in response?

May this Christmas be one of excitement and new hope for you. Tear open the gift of Jesus like you tore open your presents as a child on Christmas morning. Take the gift of God's salvation through the infant Jesus; accept Him as your Lord and Savior. May Jesus change your life for the first time, or the 100th time. A Blessed and Merry Christmas to you all! **+AMEN.**