**How f**

 This morning we celebrate the 4th Sunday of Advent by lighting all four of our Advent Candles. And tonight at our evening service we will light the 5th and final candle, the Christ candle which signifies the arrival of our Lord and Savior into our midst. Each of these Advent candles reminds us of what this season brings through the expected Savior – that is **Hope, Peace, Joy**, and **Love**. These candles not only center our lives but they keep us focus of what this season is truly about. However, I think there’s one more candle that’s missing. If there were to be one more Advent Candle to be lit, it should be the candle of “Grace”.

 The candle of Grace ought to culminate the Advent season because without grace, none of the others would matter. Grace ties Hope, Peace, Joy and Love and connects us all together as one body, as we prepare our hearts for the worship of our newborn King and Messiah.

 According to one theologian, **Grace is defined as God’s unmerited favor. It is a Divine gift rather than one’s achievement or entitlement. There is absolutely nothing that we merit such grace from God. It is available and freely given to us all. Grace appears when the God’s Word becomes flesh, in human form, and dwells among us on this day!**

 As we put our final touch in wrapping our presents and place them under the tree, God’s grace reminds us that our salvation is not depended upon whether we have been “naughty or nice.” For God is NOT Santa Claus. God will render grace upon us, even when we come a bit short on the “nice” list at times, but God still LOVES us in spite of!! That’s what Grace is about. It is God’s “unconditional love in spite of ….dot, dot, dot…. (you fill in the blank)”

 The birth of Christ is the living proof and a fulfillment of God’s promise for all humanity. That’s why during the Advent season, we draw upon the Old Testament prophecy and narratives as God established God’s covenant with the people. But this fulfillment of God’s promise – the coming of the Messiah Christ is not meant for us to keep. He is meant for us to share with others. For Christ came for ALL including the sinners and not just for those who declare themselves as righteous. As Jesus declared, ***“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance."[[1]](#footnote-1)***

That’s Jesus’s mission statement, if there was ever one!!!

 ***For unto us a Child is born, a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.[[2]](#footnote-2)*** Just as God gave His ultimate gift to us in the form of His only begotten Son, we ought to share this gift from God with others.

 In the passage that we just read, we came across this letter written by Paul the Apostle addressing to one of his young disciples Titus. It may not be your typical scriptural text as you would come across during Christmas, but I think there is much wisdom for the church to include this for Christmas Eve. **Pauls’ message to the early church captured the essence of Christ’s imminent birth appearance, as an ultimate act of Grace and a gift from God.** It kept us in proper perspective as to how we must live our everyday lives while we fix our eyes on the coming of Christ that is already here and is coming soon once again.

 You see, Titus was sent by Paul to be the organizing pastor of the early church communities in the cities of Corinth and Crete. These were Gentile Christians who had newly discovered their faith in Christ. Many shared similar struggles as we do today, balancing and nurturing our spiritual faith in a secular world.

 Many of these early Christians found themselves needing to make dramatic life-changing adjustments in their lives, while rejecting their old pagan tradition and worshipping rituals and practices. Titus’s mission was to keep their faith on course, while sharing with them this message of hope and grace, through one’s repentance…very much like the mission of John the Baptist before the Messiah came.

 Paul reminded these early believers (as well as to us today) that the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to ALL who believe in him. **We are called to renounce acts of impiety and worldly passions, and to live lives that are self-controlled, disciplined, upright and Godly**.[[3]](#footnote-3)

 Grace appears when we realize that our lives are in shamble, a total mess, yet God still chooses to send His only begotten Son to redeem us, to forgive us, and to save us…from drifting relationship further apart from God’s way. The church plays an important role in keeping one another accountable and looking out for one another’s spiritual journey, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggested, **our “life together” in Christian community is made possible only by the manifestation of grace in our imperfect lives.**

 **God’s grace appears in the form of a Redeemer who would give us this new life and new hope, fulfilling God’s promises.** The arrival of this Christ-child serves as the cornerstone of our Faith. God’s grace appeared in the form of a newborn child, who was destined to be a king not in a royal palace, but by the way of a stable in a little known town called Bethlehem.

 Through the birth of this expected Savior, God’s grace appeared in the living flesh. God interrupted our lives because God needed to restore order in this distorted and unexplained world. God leveled the playing field among various classes of social hierarchy. Christ came to put to rest of our selfish claims of entitlement and privileges among the elites, who are benefiting from the exploitation of others, especially among those who are weak, the poor, the elderly and those who are at the bottom of the social order. The expected appearance of God’s grace awakens us and puts us ALL on notice, as we pray expectedly to discern God’s will to lead us and restore us. Come, Lord Jesus Come!

 However, it is not enough for us to sing the glorious carols of this holy day and retell the story of the natal birth, as our annual tradition calls for. It may give us a sense of nostalgia imagining and reflecting what took place from a land far, far away more than 2,000 years ago, even though none of us were there but yet we believe in that miracle event that changed the course of our human history.

 **But what does that mean to us today? Why Christ’s birth matter for us? What are we going to do to proclaim this Christ-child’s birth? How are we going to respond to God’s grace that appears on this day?**

 God has challenged us to be transformed by His grace and wonder through the birth of this Savior king. God’s giving does not discriminate or does it end in Bethlehem. It is a gift that keeps on giving, as we share God’s greatest gift and hope for us all to all humankind.

 This story of Christ’s birth is worth re-telling every year, not just for the sake of nostalgia or remembrance and reminding of God’s unconditional grace that appears. It does not get old! **But the story of Christ’s birth is worth re-living not just during Christmas, but every day throughout the course of our life.**  **God’s grace appears and Christmas happens every day and anywhere!!!**

 Christmas happens whenever we see a world that is in need of a Savior, a world that is crying out for God’s mercy and grace. We have been commissioned and empowered to be the deliverers of this grace and hope to those who have fallen in challenging times – those who may have lost loved ones during this past year and are still grieving in silence; OR those who have been evacuated, lost their home or sustained property damages due to the recent flooding, hurricanes, and wildfires; OR those who have lost loved ones due to recent terrorist attacks or other forms of violence and mass shootings; OR those who were humiliated and shamed by their oppressors, harassers, and abusers; OR those who are living in constant fear of arrest and deportation because of their immigration status; OR those who are being profiled by others by the way they look, the way they talk or practice their religious freedom.

 **God’s grace will continue to appear among us, for as long as there is hope that needs to be redeemed in this world; for as long as there is love that needs to be embraced and shared all around! And it begins with us!** In essence, we are like the shepherds who responded to God’s calling as the 1st witness and pay their homage to the newborn king at the manger, but the real work of proclamation and grace begin when they were being sent back out into the field (or wherever they came from). The shepherds now had a mission to go back to where they came from and to share the Good News with others that a Savior has been born on this day, and so do we.

 Our focal point of Christmas must not be fixated at the manger and admiring the scene. Christ was only there for only a short while. But instead, we shall focus on what’s most important and that is **God’s grace appeared and is dwelling among us.** Through the faith reading of the birth narrative each year, we have volunteered ourselves to become the choir of angels (or the messengers if you will) proclaiming this Good News of God’s hope and grace to all humankind…until Christ comes once again, for the 2nd Advent of our Lord Jesus Christ.

 So as we prepare to unwrap God’s greatest present for us all through His Son Jesus Christ, may we honor God’s hope and challenge in us by paying it forward and sharing this love of our Savior Christ with others around us. May God’s grace prevail and be magnified across the land among those who may still be living in the sins of darkness. ***Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.[[4]](#footnote-4)*** Christ shall return very soon to reestablish God’s kingdom once and for all. But are we ready?

 Grace appears in the form of a newborn King during Christmas and Grace matters in our lives and sustains us no matter what challenges that life may bring us in the coming year. This is the HOPE, PEACE, JOY, LOVE and GRACE of Christmas. Thanks be to God. Christ has come and Christ will come again. In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. *Luke 5:31-32* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Isaiah 9:6* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Titus 2:11-12 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Isaiah 60:1-2 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)