

Romans 1:1-7  
Fourth Sunday in Advent  
December 18, 2022

Preparation for Christmas is a common topic of conversations these days. As the time grows nearer, either we have fewer tasks to do or we are feeling pressure about not getting everything done. Then the talk turns to what families are doing—traveling away to relatives or entertaining them at your place. As we direct our thoughts to the text before us on this fourth and final weekend in Advent we ask that same question but with a different focus.

#### WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS FOR CHRISTMAS?

- Make them
- I. All about Jesus v1-4
  - II. All about grace v5-7

Christmas is all about Jesus as was Paul's ministry. His letter to the believers at Rome began, "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God." He was introducing himself to them. Unlike most of the letters he wrote, this one wasn't to people where he had founded a congregation. He did know some of the Christians in Rome and included greetings to several in the last chapter. The lack of connection with most members may be why this introduction is longer than most.

He called himself a servant of Christ or a slave. Paul belonged to Jesus and surrendered himself completely to his will. As with slaves there was no self-determination involved in what he did. However, he didn't view that as a burden. He served gladly, with enthusiasm and joy. He dedicated himself to serving the Lord and put forth great effort in his mission work.

Paul also used the term "apostle" in reference to his position. That word means "one sent out". The Savior personally called Paul when he miraculously appeared to him while he was on the road heading to Damascus to find Christians to persecute. The message Paul shared also had come from the Lord. So even though he was not one of the Twelve who had accompanied Jesus during his earthly ministry, Paul stood beside those men as one commissioned by the Lord to proclaim the gospel.

Like the messenger, so are the Scriptures all about Jesus. Paul referred to "the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures". God's Old Testament spokesmen shared much about the coming Savior. Recorded in the Bible are over 300 prophecies of Christ. We heard one example today from

Isaiah in the First Lesson, the prophecy of the virgin birth. Christ is the center of the Scriptures. The Old Testament believers and the Roman Christians knew the Savior by faith and were saved.

The coming and work of Jesus fulfilled all that had been predicted of him. God keeps his promises. Jesus came and carried out his mission to save the world.

That Jesus whom we hear about and whose coming we are about to celebrate is true man. Paul spoke “regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David.” Yes, he was God the Son from eternity in the Holy Trinity, one with and equal to the Father and the Spirit. But he took on a human nature, the miracle of the incarnation that we are about to celebrate. God’s angel had announced to Mary that it would happen and we heard the explanation to Joseph in today’s Gospel reading. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of Mary, who was a virgin. Thus he became fully human, subject to all our experiences except sin.

As noted, he was a descendant of King David. That reference reminds us of the promise given to that famous king that the Messiah would be born in his family line. His royalty comes to mind, as well as his ancestry, as he would rule over a kingdom that would never end.

There was an important reason why the Son of God became true man. He came to be under the law, to face temptations for us. He needed to be man to be able to die. But there was more to Jesus. He is also true God. Paul noted of him, “Who through the Spirit of holiness (we might prefer not to capitalize the word ‘spirit’) was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.” He didn’t stop being God when he came to this earth. His conception added a human nature to the divine. Most of the time Jesus was on earth he lived in a state of humiliation. He set aside the full use of his divine power and glory. We catch glimpses of it whenever he performed miracles or when he demonstrated omniscience, such as knowing people’s thoughts that they had not voiced. But mostly he lived like any other person.

The fact that Jesus was true God was evident in the perfect obedience that he gave to his Father’s will and in his resurrection from death. From Easter on he lives in the state of exaltation with unlimited authority. The Apostle Paul wrote in another epistle of his position, “at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet

and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.” As God, Jesus was able to be the substitute for the entire world in living and dying. That is how he obtained redemption for us.

This unique God-man is the one who is coming at Christmas to be the guest in your home and heart. We want to be properly prepared for such a special personage. As you get ready for guests you may cater to their likes. You may make their favorite recipes and avoid serving something they dislike. You would prepare different food for a group of teens than for preschoolers or senior citizens. That’s why Paul reviewed the identity of Jesus. He wants us to know him thoroughly and that knowledge comes from his Word. So make time in the Word your priority, May our Christmas plans draw us closer to him in awe, yes, but especially in faith.

## II.

The identity of our Christmas guest is marvelous, and even fascinating to ponder the ramifications, but he had a purpose in coming and it’s all about grace. We have received grace through Jesus. At the end of his introduction Paul wrote, “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.” Although it was a common greeting it is most fitting among Christians. We often define grace as undeserved love. Actually it is the opposite of what we have deserved. The concept of a gift (an undeserved token of love) is prominent in this season as we are busy buying and wrapping presents. We look forward to receiving them. Some can’t wait to do so—both the giving and receiving. I’ve heard of amorous husbands who couldn’t wait to present what they bought for their beloved so shared it early and then had to buy something else to give on Christmas, and there are many tales of people who took an early peek at the gifts under the tree or hiding in a closet. The famous giver of the season checks who’s naughty and nice but Jesus came for the naughty ones also. That’s all of us. That fact brought comfort to Paul, who had been a persecutor of Christians. We also were the naughty ones, even the proudest or most holy-looking. We deserve misery now and hell eternally for our sins in thought, word, and deed. Instead we have forgiveness now and heaven waiting for us eternally. That’s the result of God’s grace. Jesus Christ is God’s grace in person.

That grace brings peace. We are reconciled with God. To reconcile is to make friends of those who were enemies. We have peace of conscience through God’s forgiveness, for the burden of sin no longer weighs down upon us. We don’t have to be afraid of God and his punishment. The angels burst forth into song about that

peace at the birth of Jesus. As we receive God's peace we pray that we will also reflect it as we live in and promote peace in our homes, church, and society.

God's peace was for all people. Paul mentioned the focus of his ministry was among the Gentiles. Jesus did not come only for his countrymen, the people of God's chosen nation of old. They had a unique role as the ones through whom the Savior would be born. That role was fulfilled when Christmas occurred. The Lord never intended his love to be their sole possession. He spoke of the Savior as the light for the Gentiles. When Jesus gave the Great Commission to the Church near the end of his earthly days he directed his followers to take the gospel to all nations. That call still goes out.

Then it is for you. Believers have peace which is more than calmness in a frenzied season. You know that God loves you and cares for you. You live assured that everything he allows will serve for your good. You know that when your earthly life ends he will take you to heaven. No, you and I don't deserve it, but that's God's wonderful gift. Bask in that peace, indulge in it during this Christmas season as you hear the Word in worship and ponder its impact on your life.

Christmas is also about grace shared. That grace which came and saved a wretch like me is for anybody and everybody. So get it out to them. Note that Paul spoke of the apostleship *we* received. While he often wrote in the plural because of the co-workers with him, there are lots of I's in the chapters of Romans. So we can take a broader view of the "we" here and recognize that you and I participate in the same work of spreading the gospel. It is a joyous privilege to handle the saving Word of truth and take it to the world.

Watch for and use the opportunities God gives you to call people to faith and salvation. You have something to give that won't break your budget yet is most valuable. This gospel gift is truly "one size fits all," won't wear out, grow out of fashion or get used up. Its lasting worth will be cherished forever. You can't give anything more valuable. Let the message of Jesus Christ and his grace and peace shine through all your holiday activities as you witness in word and action and attitude. Bring comfort and peace to troubled sinners just as you have received them from your Savior.

Then you will have a blessed Christmas whether you are traveling or staying home, part of a big gathering, with just a few or even all alone. Lots of pleasurable activities fill these days, but make sure your plans for Christmas highlight Jesus.