

## **“Fault, Favor, Faith, and Forgiveness”**

Liturgical Date: Christmas Eve (Lessons and Carols)

Primary Texts: Genesis 3:8-15; Isaiah 9:2, 6-7; Micah 5:2-4; St. Luke 1:26-35; St. Luke 2:1-20; St. John 1:1-14

Notes: This sermon is actually four homilies, centered on the themes above. In the context of a Lessons and Carols Service, this was preached with each homily being part of a grouping of a readings/s, hymn/carol, and then the homily.

### Homily #1: Fault

Texts: Genesis 3:8-15; Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The sermon for this evening, Christmas Eve, is actually four homilies. “Homily” is a fancy liturgical word that basically means “short sermon” (I don’t do too many of those, so I thought I will give you four homilies!). Each homily is based on a theme: Fault, Favor, Faith, and Forgiveness. A Lessons and Carols Service is centered around just what its title says: a series of readings accompanied by corresponding musical selections. The worshippers experience the true story and meaning of Christmas unfold: the Messiah is promised to a people fallen into sin, that Messiah Jesus arrives as the Babe of Bethlehem, and finally we are told who exactly this Jesus is and what He has been sent to do. This evening, after each portion of lessons and song, I will share one of these homilies. We begin with fault.

We, as human beings, love to find fault. We want to have someone to blame when things go wrong. There have been political scandals throughout our nation’s history. And it seems now we are living an age

of “perpetual scandal” with 24 hour cable news and so many print and digital options for political information. We hear of accusations, investigations, and special councils. And of course, almost all of these investigations and faultfinding missions are partisan. You really don’t see Democrats or Republicans investigating themselves. It is always about finding fault with the other side.

Did you know that God undertook the first investigation in history? We see it in our first lesson this evening from Genesis 3. But of course, God’s investigation is not partisan-driven. It is not biased. It will reveal the truth. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, are the subjects of this investigation. No subpoena was issued, God just showed up. They tried to hide, but it didn’t work. No fig leaves could hide what they have done. They have broken the one rule, eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, that God had given them in this literal paradise.

When questioned, Adam does not deny eating the fruit. But what does he do? He does what we are so good at. He tries to pass the blame. It’s Eve’s fault! She gave it to me. And by the way, God, you gave this woman to me-implying that this was actually God’s fault! What nerve, especially when God had specially instructed Adam about this tree and that he was supposed to provide leadership. Next witness up, Eve. She also admits eating the fruit, but also passes the blame. It’s the serpent’s fault! He tricked me. Never mind that by Eve’s own words she was well aware that she was not supposed to eat of the fruit of that tree. Notice that God does not even question the serpent. He is, of course, Satan and God already knows full well that his testimony is worthless as the devil

is the father of lies. With God's investigation complete, the penalty for the transgression, original sin, is laid down. And what a penalty it is! Sin and death will now enter the world.

So I would ask you this evening, descendent of Adam and Eve, where does your finger point when you mess up, when you do something wrong, when you sin? Too often we point it in other directions: it's society's fault, it's my parents' fault, my bosses' fault, my co-workers' fault, my kids' fault, my teachers' fault, the other driver's fault. Or maybe we want to choose something bigger: big government's fault, big business' fault, big tech's fault. And we could go on. But when we look into the mirror of God's Law we see our true state. We are sinners, and big ones at that. We have done the evil that God forbids and not done the good that He commands. That finger of fault must point back at ourselves. Yes, we have inherited original sin. But we have produced plenty of "actual" sin by our own doing too.

But there is hope. Even as God concludes His investigation and pronounces His just judgment, He promises a savior in Genesis 3:15. We will see that quite literally fleshed out, as we continue this evening. Adam and Eve had descended into darkness, but as Isaiah 9:2 told us those in darkness will see a great light. Is it any coincidence that God first speaks light in creation? I think not.

We heard those words that Isaiah used to describe the promised child and they are familiar to many of us: wonderful, counselor, mighty, everlasting, Prince of Peace, justice, and zeal. And don't to forget to add "serpent crusher." A child, a Savior, has been promised and He will come. Even though He would do no wrong and no fault could be found

in Him, He would willingly point the finger toward Himself and take on the sin of the world.

### Homily #2: Favor

Texts: Micah 5:2-4; St. Luke 1:26-35

Favor. And favor from a place that the world would not choose. O little town of Bethlehem, indeed. Not even much of a town size-wise. More like a hamlet. If they had road atlases or “google maps” back then it would just be a little dot. Historians estimate just a few hundred people lived in Bethlehem when Jesus was born. Jerusalem, the great holy city and political capital of Israel would have been a much more obvious choice. But it was to be Bethlehem, just as the prophet Micah said.

And although small, Bethlehem certainly had quite the history. Jacob-son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham-who was renamed “Israel”- would bury his beloved Rachel near Bethlehem. Ruth, the faithful daughter-in-law, had accompanied Naomi back to Bethlehem after her sojourn in Moab. There she met generous Boaz and became one of God’s people. Ruth gave birth to Obed, the father of Jesse, of whose stump of a family tree would shoot forth David. God’s favored King of Israel would tend sheep on the rocky hillsides of Bethlehem. And he would be anointed by Samuel to become king. Yes, Bethlehem was small, but favored.

And now the time had come for Bethlehem to be the site of the most important birth in history. The Ancient of Days is sending the One who had co-existed with Him from all eternity. This child would restore the broken relationship between God and His people. This is not just

“peace and love” in a sappy, sentimental way. This reconciliation is most meaningful and has eternal importance.

But there is another major detail to be taken care of. God never works randomly or without order. All the “t’s” are crossed and “i’s” dotted. This Messiah is the Son of God. He is also to be the Son of Man. This means that He would be conceived in a miraculous way, as the Messiah would be born of a virgin. It also means that the baby would develop, grow, and be birthed from the womb of a woman-just as all children are. This woman would be from the north of Israel, Nazareth, but somehow must end up in Bethlehem to give birth to the child. She must be of the line of David. It is all coming together, all these varied prophecies that would seem almost impossible to connect, except that God is orchestrating His plan and they all will fall right into place.

And who is chosen, who finds the favor of God to bear the very Son of God? It is none other than the Virgin Mary-just as the Evangelist St. Luke told us chapter 1 of his Gospel. The angel Gabriel speaks those powerful words to Mary in verse 28, *“Hail, thou that art most highly favored, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.”*

Not only would the Lord be with her over the next nine months, but with her as her and Joseph raised the very Son of God, the fully human and fully divine Jesus. In the womb of this likely very young woman, this baby was growing, thriving, pushing, kicking, stretching, and turning over. Mary is called the favored one in the Bible for good reason. The throne of David would be restored through the child that she would bear, and His reign would be forever.

Homily #3: Faith

Texts: St. Luke 2:1-14

Faith. These words from the second chapter of Luke are very familiar to us believers. And many non-believers are familiar with them too. The promised Messiah's birth is upon us. The faith in the promise is now transitioning to faith in the Christ that has come into the world.

The Roman Empire is at, or near, its peak of power. From Rome they controlled a huge swath of territory-including this far-off province known as Judea. Even the name of the Empire's leader, Caesar Augustus, means "majestic", "magnificent." Like a child counting his pennies to see how many he has, he calls for a census-a count of his subjects. By requiring everyone to go back to their town of origin rather than just being counted where they currently lived, he created a hardship for many people. However, to the mighty Caesar living in comfort and luxury he was far removed from and not too concerned about that. It certainly wasn't easy for the Holy Family. Traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem with a woman very far along in pregnancy was arduous. But as we established earlier, this is all fulfilling the prophecies set forth in God's plan.

This child, incarnate in His virgin mother by the power of the Holy Spirit, came from heaven to earth. He too, would make this journey to Bethlehem. And the birth of this child is celebrated by billions around the world to this very day. The faithful have faith. We believe He is the king, the savior. But Jesus arrived rather peacefully, humbly, and quietly, did He not? Mary and Joseph were not greeted with fanfare, but rather a small town with no rooms available. The throne for this king would not be rich padded leather chair made of finely carved hardwood.

It would be a simple manger, a depository for hay to feed animals. But this is the first “King Size Bed”, you could say. He wore not royal robes of silk or velvet, but simple cloth. No golden crown with jewels was upon His head, but his forehead no doubt felt the tender and joyful kisses of His earthly parents.

It is only then, after this humble birth is chronicled for us, that the angels arrived that night to announce His birth. But whom did this announcement come to? A birth announcement in the local media? Roman officials? Jewish religious leaders? Profitable businessmen? No, no. *“And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.”* Regular “working class Joes” you could say. They got the honor of this heavenly pronouncement from the angels and an audience with the long-promised Messiah. Not too many people knew that significance of that first Christmas night, but the world would, soon enough.

God chooses how and when He comes to us and gives us His gifts. He has said our salvation comes to us by faith. God the Holy Spirit works this faith in our hearts by the hearing of His Word, in being cleansed by water and Word in Holy Baptism, and in receiving the very body and blood of Jesus Christ with the bread and wine in His Holy Supper. Words, water, bread, and wine-they seem so simple. These may not be the means that we would choose to deliver the greatest gift from God of faith, but then again we probably wouldn’t have required the forgiveness of sins to arise out of the crucifixion of Jesus either. God does not conform to our expectations any more than we conform to His. And for this we say, “thanks be to God.”

#### Homily #4: Forgiveness

Texts: St. Luke 2:15-20, St. John 1:1-14

Forgiveness. Without God there cannot be true forgiveness. To understand this we must go back a long way as we begin this fourth and final homily this evening. Genesis 1:1, *"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth."* Nothing was ever truer, for without God, the source of all knowledge and truth, nothing could exist. God's creative power is among His most significant attributes. We humans are clever beings and some of us are pretty "creative." But if you think about it, we are not really creating from scratch as God did. We are using the elements that He has provided to create and make things. Without God, we could make nothing. Thus it is when we extend forgiveness to someone, we did not create the forgiveness but are actually using something that God has created, modeled, and done for us.

And not only is creating out of nothing an attribute of God, so is love. In fact, as Lutherans, we would go as far as to say that this is the starting point with the attributes of God. As St. John would write in the first of his three Epistles, "God is love." And we also understand that for love to exist there must be some type of relationship. For forgiveness to be extended in a relationship, there must be a relationship that exists. God created us to be in relationship with Him and others. This relationship, as we heard in our first lesson this evening, was shattered when the first bite of the forbidden fruit was taken. But God in His mercy has done what is needed, providing the forgiveness for the chasm between God and man to be crossed.



St. John tells us how that is done in our final lesson. The Apostle takes us back even before the point when God created the earth. *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”* This Word is Jesus before He was incarnate as man. He was always there, eternally existing with the Father. In relationship with Him. Before God spoke those creative words in creation week “let there be light”, there was already the uncreated Word and light. This Word and light were in perfect relationship with the Father. A perfect love-so powerful, so bountiful, that it spilled over to create this vast universe.

St. John makes it very clear in chapter 1 of the Gospel that he authored under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that this Word and light is Jesus that has come. He has invaded our dark sinful world to bring forgiveness, to bring salvation. The forgiveness that we receive and extend all flows from what Jesus has done: dying and rising again to defeat sin, death, and the devil. Yes, that darkness that needed to be overcome by light is our fault. We are sinners. It is obvious that left to our own devices all manner of evil overruns the world. And as verse 5 told us, *“And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.”*

The coming of the Word made flesh, Jesus, is the culmination of everything God had planned from the beginning. The Savior was promised in the Garden of Eden, right after the fall into sin. God used his chosen spokesmen including Moses, Isaiah, and Micah to get his message out. Then came John the Baptist, spoken of in John 1 as well, who was not the light, but “bore witness”, pointed to the light. In the fullness of time, just as God planned it, Jesus was born and His mission

of salvation through the atonement for and giving of the forgiveness of sins began. The Gospel writers: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, were chosen by God to record all of this for us. They tell us how the light penetrated the darkness and then was pierced for our transgressions. Love and forgiveness would, and have won. And they also tell us that on the Last Day, Jesus will return in judgment and victory. All of those who have received His forgiveness will live as His people in His eternal kingdom.

We are here tonight to celebrate that as verse 14 said, *“the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.”* Not only to celebrate a historical event, but as that Jesus-this Word made flesh-has reached our own hearts. Through the work of the Holy Spirit we receive this Christmas gift in faith. We receive the forgiveness that only God can create and give. We are changed from children of the darkness and wrath to children of His favor. And how can our reaction be any different that the shepherds who heard the angels on that first Christmas? *“Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.”*

God didn't keep His Word to Himself. We join with the angels, Mary, the shepherds, and wise men and women of history that have lauded and praised His birth. That have worshipped before Him, receiving Him: His love and forgiveness. The light shines, even in the darkness of your sins, fears, and doubts, and that light has overcome them, once and for all.

Shortly, the Sanctuary will go dark, except for the candles on our Advent wreath. The white Christ Candle will then be lit, because Jesus is

the light come into a dark world. And then the light will be taken from this candle representing Jesus, and distributed to all of us here. His light, His favor, faith, and forgiveness dwells in each of His children. The light of the world makes us His lights in a dark world to go forth with His message. Then, as is tradition, we sing *Silent Night*.

That first Christmas night was fairly “silent” as His birth went unnoticed by most-except for those select few that we heard about this evening. And it was certainly “holy” as the Holy One-the only one born without sin who would never sin had emerged from the womb of the Virgin Mary in that humble stable. And this very night is holy as well. It has been made holy, pure, undefiled by the work of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. But let it not be silent. Not only as we sing tonight gathered to celebrate and worship Him. But bold, clear, and loud as we go forth from this place and share the Gospel message that the Savior has come. Just as those shepherds went forth as the first evangelists of the birth of the Savior Jesus, *“And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.”*

And when you lay your head down to sleep tonight, do so in peace knowing that this Christ Child has come for you. He has taken your fault upon Himself and paid the price in His own lifeblood. He has shown you favor. He dwells in your heart in faith. He has graciously granted forgiveness. Yes, “sleep in heavenly peace” for “Christ the Savior is born!”

Amen.