

SERMON
St. John's Episcopal Church, Roanoke, Virginia
The Rev. Alexander H. Webb II ("Sandy"), Curate
25 December 2011

Christmas Day (Year B) Titus 3:4-7

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Did you know that your life was saved a few days ago?

In asking this question, I intend no spiritual allusion. Your physical, corporeal, earth-bound life was imperiled until just a few days ago, and you may not have even noticed.

For the last several months, this fragile earth our island home has been careening through the vacuum of space. We have been racing away from the sun at an average pace of thirty kilometers a second. Our planet has been sprinting away from its source of light and life; hurtling further and further from the very fountain of energy on which its life depends.

The signs of peril have not been hard to see: The weather has grown cooler, the days have grown shorter, and the nights – oh, the nights – have grown so much deeper. If these trends had continued, the earth would have been thrown into an ice age unprecedented in the entire annals of its geological history. The world would have gone dark, the tropical seas would have frozen over, and life itself would have been snuffed out.

But, this tale of woe never came to pass. As our planet approached the point of no return, the sun reached out and saved us with its gravitational pull. There was no fanfare, no great tremor, and many of us did not even notice. In quiet simplicity, and without any help from us, the sun turned us back towards itself. Slowly, light will return, warmth will be restored, and new life will spring forth all around.

Before the birth of Christ, humanity itself was hurtling through space. We chose to run far away from the source of our light and life. We chose not to drink from the very fountain of our being.

God tried other means to save his lost creation: In the beginning, he made us in his image, so that we might see his face in the mirror. He laid out the splendor of creation, so that we could touch his grandeur. He sent the law and the prophets, so that we might hear his voice, and gain knowledge of salvation from those near at-hand.¹

But, when all else failed, just as humanity approached the point of no return, God reached out and turned us back. There was no fanfare, no great tremor, and many people did not even notice. In quiet simplicity, and without any help from us, God took hold of the world, and turned us back towards himself.

¹ Paraphrase: St. Athanasius. *On the Incarnation*. §12.

St. Paul writes in his letter to Titus, “When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy...through Jesus Christ our Savior.”

The world had strayed far off course. Dramatic change could only be brought about by dramatic intervention. It was as though Superman needed to swoop in from above and magically set everything right. But, instead of a superhero, humanity got a baby.

Confounding all expectations, the story of our salvation begins with a tiny baby and his poor, unwed mother, shivering in a shed behind an oversold motel, far away from home.

In the nativity story, we see fear and frustration; we see poverty and political corruption. Like Christ himself, this humble tableau absorbs into itself all the pain and trepidation of a hurting and broken world. Centuries of sin are focused for a single moment, on a tiny baby lying in a manger.

In this one tiny baby, everything is received; everything is redeemed.

God’s means of intervening in the world was so subtle and slight that it almost escaped notice, but the impact of that quiet intervention, the impact of that one holy child, has echoed through the cosmos ever since.

In *Christ*, the world was gently turned back towards God. In *Christ*, light pierced darkness, joy supplanted sorrow, and humanity once again began to sip from the true fountain of life. In *Christ*, the goodness and loving kindness of God appeared to save us, so that we might become heirs of eternal life, according to his mercy.

Merry Christmas.

Amen.