

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

As I sit in my office writing this, I've already seen the signs: Christmas trees on news-shows, pre and post "black Friday" advertisements all talking about buying Christmas presents as early (and as often) as possible. Facebook is full of pictures of Christmas trees, ornaments and buying ideas/suggestions. We all know the signs, we're not likely to miss this particular event. But occasionally there will be an event where we'll not see the signs until after the event happened. We'll ask ourselves how we missed seeing the signs, and wonder why we didn't get ready.

But signs of Christmas are obvious, decorations on houses, commercials on televisions, radios, Facebook, just about everywhere. Santa Claus, presents, lists of what to buy and for whom and items crossed off as shopping gets done. We get catalogs in the mail, several inch-high stacks of catalogs in the mail. Calendars are about to expire, and countdowns to Christmas have started, mostly around shopping days left, but some simply counting down the days. And of course sweaters and sweatshirts with Christmas stuff abound. The white stuff has fallen so unless it all melts, we'll have a white Christmas up here in the northland. We see the signs.

A couple thousand years ago a sign appeared too, it was a young woman named Mary who became pregnant without knowing a man, who gave birth to her first-born while sheltering in a stable of sorts in a town named Bethlehem. Most people really didn't know anything about that sign, not until long after it happened.

It's still a sign for us, the birth of this baby boy. But it's an event that happened two thousand years ago, so why are we getting ready for this when there's a future event coming, one that will be heralded by "signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars," with "distress among nations." "The Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." Perhaps that's what we should be getting ready for, the coming of God in the last day, when our "redemption is drawing near." The last day, judgment day, judgment for all.

So how do we get ready for such a judgment? How can we get ready for God reviewing our lives, all of our lives? What we have done, what we have left undone. Will our lives be weighed, and if so will there be enough to be called good? But what about the evil that we've done, the wrongs committed? And of course the truth is, we are all of us, sinners. So how do we get ready?

We get ready for the second coming by our getting ready for the first coming. The approaching Christmas celebration is a sign of our redemption drawing near. Christmas is a sign of our redemption in and through Jesus Christ, Son of God, Son of Man, born of a young virgin mother, laid in a manger. Jesus who is born to redeem us, free us from the power of sin and the devil. Jesus who comes to forgive, who comes with mercy and

love. Jesus who comes to be judged, measured and crucified in our place, for you and I. Jesus who doesn't accuse us, who doesn't condemn us, but how makes us his brothers and sisters in our baptisms, marked with his cross, the cross of Christ, sealed by the Holy Spirit. Jesus sent by God to save us, mercy over measuring, forgiveness over condemnation, love conquers all.

We see the signs of his coming when we witness a baptism, when we share in the Lord's Supper, we hear the signs of his coming when we confess our sins and receive forgiveness. The signs are there! The signs are here!

Brothers and sisters, don't get discouraged by distress among nations, by wars and rumors of war, and the fact that these things are always present. Don't get so caught up in the season that it becomes a time of depression, resentment, anger, disregard of others. Don't get so caught up running around that the signs of Christmas become a burden. It gets dark early these days, when you're feeling weighed down, look at the beauty of the sun, the moon, the stars, God's creation. And even more so, look to the mercy that is born in Bethlehem, the love that is born in Bethlehem, the resurrection that springs forth from that birth in Bethlehem, the forgiveness of sins that is born in Bethlehem.

AMEN