The Christmas Verdict

Co-missioners,

Our editor, a working pastor and preacher, is also our contributor this week. We pass along a recent sermon of his on a Christmas text that few preachers are drawn to. God grant relief for dark December days, crackling with judgment.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community

The Christmas Verdict (A Sermon)

by Jerome Burce



Author's note—

Almost all the Christmas Eve sermons I've preached over the years have been anchored squarely in one aspect or another of St. Luke's great Christmas text. A year ago I seized instead on the Psalm appointed for the evening, no. 96, and worked from that. I pass the results along today for two reasons. First, as a possible thought-provoker for fellow preachers who even now are starting to sweat over what they'll say next Thursday. Second, for the possible refreshment of anyone else who hasn't heard or explored how this Psalm—God speaking through the Psalm—begs for our trust, our joy, as it gushes with Christmas Gospel. Gospel, mind you, that is even more relevant and pressing in December 2020 than it was in 2019. --*JEB*

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Grace and peace to you this Christmas Eve from God our Father, and from Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior that baby in the manger grew into.

Such a story we heard just now—to some of you as familiar as a story can get, and to others not so much, perhaps. Yet for all of us the question is the same. What does this story have to do with us? What does God want *us* to hear and trust right now, this very night, as we listen to it?

For that let's turn to an old, old song that predated this baby by a thousand years or so. You'll find parts of it printed in the bulletin, at the point where we left off just now. It's from the Bible, in the Book of Psalms. Christians have been reading or singing it on Christmas Eve since forever. Back in the 1700's a poet named Isaac Watts turned a lot of it into a Christmas song that most all of you know quite well, and some of you by heart—all four stanzas, even. The song is "Joy to the World."

Here's the original, Psalm 96. You might want to follow along. As you do, take it for granted that God had these words and others like them in mind on the night Jesus was born—

Sing to the Lord a new song; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his marvelous works among all the peoples. For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised. Worship the Lord in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth. Say among the nations, 'The Lord is king! He will judge the peoples with equity.' *—he'll be fair, that is, as people themselves are not*. Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord—for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth.

I love that line: "All the trees of the forest shall sing for joy…."

A couple of years ago I spent a week in Israel. The group I was with didn't make it to Bethlehem, but we saw it from a distance.

I recall a town-sized cluster of white buildings surrounded by stony fields. I didn't notice many trees. Were there woods nearby on that first long ago Christmas? I sure would like to think so.

I'd like to think that when the sky erupted that night with the song of the heavenly host—that great army of fearsome angels—the trees of the nearby woods joined in on the chorus, just as the Psalm had said they would: a great, loud, ever so melodious rustling of leaves somewhere out there in the dark, a sound that sent a shiver of excitement up the spines of whoever got to hear it—

And why, that night, would those trees have made that sound? Back to the Psalm: because the Lord had come. That's Lord as in the God of Israel. That's Lord as in the one and only real God who was and is and ever will be God. That's Lord as in the God who has the final say on every human being in Fairview Park tonight, whether they admit it or not, whether they *believe* it or not.

That God—our God—had come to earth in Bethlehem when Jesus was born. And why had he come? Again the Psalm: to judge the earth—that's what it says; to judge the world with his righteousness, and the peoples with his truth.

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So here's a thought that next to no one here has thought before, I'll bet. I hadn't thought it myself until a couple of weeks ago when I dug into my homework for tonight. And when all of a sudden it popped up at me from these words of the Bible I was staring at, it made me so happy, I couldn't help but decide to pass it along. I can't think of a better, more useful gift for any of us on Christmas night in 2019. Here it is—



Christmas Day. You've heard of that. Judgment Day. You've all heard of that too. So here's what God is saying through his Psalm. The two are one and the same. Christmas Day *is* Judgment Day. Christmas Day, that first Christmas Day, is the Day of Days when God the Judge issued his final, definitive verdict on the world—on all the people who fill the world.

And such a verdict it *was*—such a verdict it *is*. Whoever could imagine it, whoever could repeat it without somebody else telling them immediately how crazy they are, but listen: it's out there. We heard it just now in the song of the angels, the one that nobody dares or even wants to believe, though the trees believe it. That's why their leaves are rustling with such joy and excitement on that first Christmas night.

Listen again: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace: good will toward humankind." Good will, as in good thoughts, a good opinion—*that* is God's judgment, God's final judgment, on a world crammed with human beings that we ourselves find so wretchedly unpleasing. We do. We can't help but do it. Even at Christmas when all of us are on our best behavior, all trying our hardest to keep it merry not just for ourselves but for the people around us, even then, how can you keep from spotting all those nasty flies in the ointment of this humanity we're forced to share with everybody else? That's a brutal way of putting it, I know, but let's be honest. There it is. How do you keep from all the judging of each other we were born to do—that we've simply have got to do because life in the world we know demands that we do it? Even at Christmas we're driven to do it.

I have a boyhood memory—it goes way, way back— of a little girl

sitting beside the tree one Christmas morning with angry tears streaming down her face. The issue was this. Now that all the presents were open, she was looking at her pile of them. Next to it was her sister's pile. As she compared the two it seemed to her that her pile was a bit smaller, the presents not quite so nice. And so she threw a fit—and I do mean a fit. I'll bet it felt to her mother that morning like a little knife between the ribs. Little children can hurt so badly when they cut loose on their mothers with their sharp little judgments.

As for me, mid-sized boy that I was, I judged that little girl. I decided she was selfish. And for many years after I kept a wary eye on her to see if she'd grow out of it. She did. Or at least I think she did.

But if she hadn't, so what? In the end, so what? Since when did my opinion count? What mattered so much more to start with was her mother's opinion—and since when does a real mom turn the love-tap off, no matter what grief the kids cause her? And beneath that lay this other huge bedrock point. Almighty God, you see, had long since weighed in with his judgment on the child—his Christmas judgment. On that very morning she threw her fit, God was holding her already in his high and everlasting regard. He thought so well of her. He treasured her. He was not about to lose her, brat though she was.

And while it's sorta, kinda easy to say this about a child—we'd expect that much of God; her mother sure would—it's so much harder to say it when the brat you're talking about is all grown up, and ought to know better.

We heard just now about some grownups who were scared witless when the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the piercing glory of the Lord tore away the cloak of darkness they were huddled in that night. Well, of course they were scared. They

knew in a frozen heartbeat what this was about. Judgment Day. Judgment Day for them. And being the kind of people they were, the last thing they imagined was that any judge, least of all God the Judge, would have anything good to say about them. Nobody else did. Really, they were shepherds. They had a tough time speaking well of each other, I'll bet.

So what a surprise, such a shocking, jaw-dropping surprise, when the angel says, "Don't be afraid"; when he says, "the verdict is in, the verdict is good. You've got a Savior. Go see." So off they go, with haste—of course they step on it—and on the way they hear God's judgment ringing from the skies, and when they get to where they're going—guess what?—they find this judgment of God lying in that manger the angel talked about. And my oh my, such a judgment it is, so unthinkably good. See how much *they* matter to God, that God should think to put his baby there *for them*—to put *himself* in that baby for them, all cuddled and wrapped in the awesome holy splendor of straw and swaddling clothes—of grace and truth, as St. John says. Imagine that.

Later the baby grows up and gets to work. He goes around announcing the Christmas verdict so that others can hear it too. Naturally the folks he goes to first—this is God's way—are all those grown up brats the decent people can't stand because they look so awful or behave so badly. You can check it for yourself in the record. To each and every one Jesus makes it known that God treasures them too.

Now for doing that he pays a price. A horrible price. You may have heard. Two days later Easter happens.

Easter, you might say, is God's Christmas verdict on steroids. How much do you matter to God this Christmas night, not some of you, but all of you? You matter so much—your children too—that God pushed that Child of his from a manger to a cross. Jesus

died because God thinks you're worth it. That's his judgment. And this is true as well for any of you who aren't so sure you can swallow it. I hope you do. *God* hopes you do.

We've all heard tell of that other Judgment Day, the one to come. On that day the only question that will finally matter is whether you'll count on God to remember his Christmas verdict and stick with it. The alternative is to insist that he issue a second verdict, one that rests not on his promises, so crazy and wild, but instead on you: your values, your attitudes, your achievements—your failure to achieve. Please don't force God to judge you on that. It can't turn out good. For those of you who know the story, remember what happened to a certain Pharisee when he stood in the temple asking God to certify the verdict he had reached about himself. Remember too the tax collector who simply knelt in the corner begging God to honor the Christmas verdict.

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And with that some quick thoughts about our job, our Christmas job. I'm talking here especially to those of you who know Christ well, and have staked your lives on him.

Here's how the Psalm describes it: "Sing to the Lord a new song; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his marvelous works among all the peoples."



In other words, push the Christmas verdict. Do it every day. Do it as God did it on Christmas night—with words, yes; but with deeds too. There's more punch packed in the showing than there is in the telling. The fact of the baby in the manger—the man on the cross—carries much more weight than

the angels' song, marvelous though it was.

We're about to spend another year in a world that's killing itself with all the foul and angry judgments that people spew at each other. "I'm right, you're wrong; I'm good, you're bad; see it my way or die. I'll never talk to you again."

That's what sin is about: every person acting like a little god who ought to have the final say on what's what. Of course we butt heads. We have to. There's no escaping it.

And that's what Christ was born to save us from.

Our Christmas job is to see past our own judgments about the other guy's opinions, or even his behavior, and to see her instead through God's judgment. God's Christmas judgment. "Peace on earth, good will toward people—I treasure them all."

Our job this year is to sing *that* new song, the angels' song, in a world that doesn't know it, or forgot it, or can't begin to take it seriously. The shepherds sang it too, of course, as they tromped back to work. I can't imagine, by the way, that everyone in Bethlehem was thrilled to hear it. I'll bet somebody threw open a window and yelled at them to knock it off with all the foolishness and racket. They kept singing anyway, praising and glorifying God, as it says.

Christians at their best have done that ever since. They've been way out front in treasuring the neighbors that all others despise. A lot of them have suffered for it. At their worst they've stood with the herd, pointing fingers at the sinners. God save us from that. It's the very thing that Christ our Lord refuses to do.

He doesn't do it tonight. He doesn't do it to you. Instead he comes in the Word you're hearing, in the bread and wine you're

about to get, and he lets you know that the Christmas verdict still applies. It always will—forever and ever, as we say in church. It applies to you, to everyone around you. It applies to the guy who's driving down the road out there half drunk. It applies to the person whose firm and loud opinion at tomorrow's dinner table will make you want to scream.

Somewhere on the other side of the noise and nonsense, that person is God's treasure. You are too. That's the verdict that starts in that manger where Jesus lies. So please, use it. Put it to work, as hard as that may be. To you who are wise in the word, remember that you are leaves on the tree of life whose name is Jesus Christ.

Let's rustle up some noise this year to the glory of God and for joy to the world.

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The peace of God that surpasses all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.