

The title for today's message is: **Epiphany a message of freedom and grace.**

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen

The Christmas season is over. The Christmas tree is gone and its decorations have been put away for another year.

Our waistline has stopped expanding, stress levels are generally lower and our minds changed focus as we begin the New Year.

So, today is a good day to review the meaning of Christmas. Most sermons begin the Christmas with the birth of Jesus in the stable at Bethlehem.

Then they quickly move out to view the cross at Jerusalem as the most recognized place of salvation and the destiny of Jesus.

Bethlehem is also a place of salvation, and needs no other view than that of Jesus lying in the manger.

You know the story of Christmas and you know the story of salvation, but you may not know the full impact of Jesus' birth at Bethlehem.

To begin, I'm going to make a profound statement about Christmas, that from one perspective summarizes the whole event.

And that is, Christmas redefines holiness. I'm going to say it again, Christmas redefines holiness.

Now in order to understand that statement we need to turn back a few pages and enter the Old Testament.

Its in the Old Testament that another understanding of holiness can be found so that a clear comparison can be made.

Look, the holiness of God meant that God was a unique being and separated from His creation.

God was considered free from any blemish or immorality and for that reason there was a space between Him and what was considered common.

For example; If any person who had come face to face with God it would have meant death to them.

Sounds harsh, but death came not as a punishment, but simply that the two different states could not exist together.

Now this problem needed to be resolved in order to allow God's love and blessings to flow to His creation on earth.

So, out of necessity a code of moral practice and ritual was established in order for God's creation to safely approach God.

The truth is a life free from immorality and blemish was considered a life very pleasing to God.

However should that fail at any time, and it did on a daily basis, then a regular ritual a sacrifice on the altar became a way that could bring forgiveness and continued blessing from God.

Through their ritual practice and sacrifice a person could get near God, but not in the physical presence of God.

Look, we have a cultural mindset today that is very similar to that of the people of the Old Testament.

We also use the separation of certain people as a means to express holiness or at least self importance.

The fact is today, a common person cannot simply go and meet a King or Queen, nor the President of the USA.

They are just too lofty and important to be bothered with the common people at street level.

Therefore there are extensive cultural practices and rituals that must be taken first in order to meet them.

There are tedious phone calls to be made, appointments to be gotten, and preliminary interviews to undergo.

Forms and more forms to fill out, and for some a body search if necessary would need to be carried out.

Even after all of that, you may only get as far as the waiting room with a brochure placed in your hand.

This mindset also shows itself in Christian churches today. In part, it can be witnessed and experienced during a worship service.

Areas are created, the Sanctuary, and things made, the altar, and rituals performed. All pointing to the Old Testament idea of holiness.

Of course, they have their rightful place and value. They help to remind us of our salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord.

They can also strengthen our spiritual life through physical interaction with them, kneeling at the altar, and taking communion.

Yet, they can also be a trap where Old Testament thinking can creep in and make them more important than they ought to be.

Now, let us go back to baby Jesus in the manger at Bethlehem, where we see laying in the manger God Himself.

A miracle had happened. God was in the presence of His creation. He Himself was clothed with flesh just like you and me.

In His presence, besides Mary and Joseph, were the poor shepherds from the fields nearby.

And since the manger was in a stable, God was also in the presence of animals and dirt in general.

God was in the presence of the common and the profane. There in God's presence death was no more.

In the manger at Bethlehem, that defined holiness in the Old Testament was now no more.

All of God's creation was represented in the stable at Bethlehem. When they looked into the manger they saw baby Jesus, and they also saw the face of salvation.

They saw God's grace enacted then and there. They saw how God had accepted them with all their blemishes and sin without judgement.

This is the good news of Christmas, that God has accepted you and me, whether good or bad, and we are no longer separated from God.

As a result of God simply coming into our presence in the manger, He has accepted you and me without judgement or condemnation.

He has come because He is the God of creation and He is determined in every way to restore His creation to life now and forever.

The foreigners from the east and the shepherds departed from Jesus with more than joy in their hearts.

They left the presence of God knowing that He was a gracious God who cared for the wellbeing of His creation.

They left with joy, peace, hope and faith in a God that cared for them whether in life or in death.

They had no knowledge of Jesus' destination to the cross at Jerusalem; nonetheless, they were comforted in the knowledge of their everlasting salvation through being once in the presence of God.

All of a sudden, through the birth of Jesus, the whole Temple priesthood, and rituals and the old testament meaning of holiness had become redundant.

Now, if you believe Jesus is the Son of God then there is no longer the need to drag a sacrificial lamb to the altar to gain forgiveness of sins and renewed blessing.

The New Testament redefines the meaning of holiness. It was through the birth, life and death of Jesus on earth that gave a new meaning to holiness.

Through the life of Jesus, He revealed the love that God had for His creation. Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry, raised the dead to life.

He touched the lives of people wherever He went giving them peace, hope, and faith in a God who cared for them.

And in the end, Jesus gave His own life on the cross in Jerusalem for our welfare so that we too may have life with Him now and forever.

Jesus, the Son of God had descended from His lofty throne in heaven to give life to His creation here on earth.

And God has called you and me to be a blessing bearer to all His creation, and He has called us to be His disciples, and to be holy people.

All these callings are one and the same. The bottom line is, He has called us to love one another as He has loved us.

Nothing else is important to God. Finally, pray that you may not slip back into the Old Testament ways of thinking and practices because Christmas has redefined holiness and has given you salvation. Amen.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all. Amen.