

Holy Faith Jim Gordon Christmas Day 2018 Isaiah 62: 6-12 Psalm 97 Titus 3:4-7 Luke 2: 1-20

*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.*

In the name of God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I'm not sure Christmas Day sermons should be heavy on theology; it seems more a day to simply celebrate the birth of our Lord, listen to beautiful, traditional music, go home and open presents — if you haven't already — then enjoy a fine meal with family and friends.

But I also realize that, though I see many familiar faces this morning, there are some of you who aren't familiar, and this sermon might be the only theology you hear for a while. So bear with me.

I'm going to focus on two sentences, sentences that form the spine of salvation belief — two sentences without which they'd be no reason for the holiday, the holiday cheer or a Christmas Day service.

Christmas has an interesting and rather up-and-down history. There are times when its observance has been discouraged, even times when it has been banned — thank you, Puritans. Closer to our own day, did you know that Scotland — home to those dour Presbyterians, who connected the observance to Romish extravagance — abolished Christmas in 1640 and only made it an official public holiday in 1958?

Incidentally, Anglicans played a role in bringing back the Christmas celebration, as did the writings of Charles Dickens — God bless us every one.

But there's a reference to a Christmas — a Christ-Mass — in a document written in the year 70, though it would be another 266 years before the first recorded Christmas celebration, in 336 in Rome.

The fourth century was a difficult time for orthodox believers in the faith. A number of heresies were going strong — heresies that diminished either the humanity of Christ or the divinity of Christ. Arianism, one of the heresies that diminished Christ's divinity, at

times had the backing of the emperor of Rome and looked certain to sweep all before it. And probably would have — but for the persistent and ferocious devotion to orthodoxy by an African bishop by the name of Athanasius.

Athanasius' argument against Arianism can be reduced to one statement — and this is one of our two sentences for the day: Only God can save. Arianism believed Jesus, whom they worshipped, to be a most exalted creature, but a creature nevertheless. How, Athanasius asked, can you worship anything less than God? And how can a creature — even an exalted one — break the power of sin and bring humanity to eternal life?

That argument — eventually — took care of the question of Christ's divinity, and thus we have the words of the Nicene Creed — God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God — recited on every Sunday and all major feasts. What about Christ's humanity? Athanasius' argument for this also can be reduced to a single sentence. Only that which has been assumed can be redeemed. In order for all of humanity's sins to be paid for by Jesus on the cross, he had to be human, fully human, from the top of his head to the tip of his toes.

So heresies that claimed that Jesus only appeared to be human, only appeared to live and suffer and die, were shown to be empty and, again, in time, Athanasius carried the day.

We owe him a lot. And it is because of him, in large part, that this day we celebrate the second person of the Trinitarian God coming down from heaven, becoming incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary and being made man — fully man.

Because of that fact, when 33 years later he is nailed to the cross, our sins — yours and mine and those of everybody else who ever lived or will ever live — are also nailed to the cross, and salvation — salvation and everlasting life — are ours, if we but accept them.

Two sentences: Only God can save. And only that which is assumed can be redeemed. Because of the first, we know that Jesus was and

is God. Because of the second, when God the Father gave Jesus new life, he gave us new life.

Merry Christmas.