

12.21.2025 Advent 4

Pastor Tim McKenzie

Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

“Set apart for the gospel”

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

Christmas is almost here. Perhaps you’ve got your Christmas shopping done; sent some cards; and already have some gifts wrapped and under the tree. Yet this season can also be a difficult time of the year for many: for those grieving, those struggling with financial burdens during a very materialistic season, those facing illness, and those with difficult family memories of Christmas. Yet it is precisely amid our very real human situations that Jesus is born. He is the greatest gift any of us will ever experience because he will live and grow in you over your entire life.

This gift of Jesus Christ is what Paul is sharing with us in today’s reading from Romans. He writes, “*Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh...*” Paul calls himself a servant, yet he was one of the least likely people to become a servant of Christ. He had approved of the murder of Stephen (Acts 8:1) and had persecuted the church (Acts 8:3; Gal. 1:13). Yet Paul’s story is as real as any of our stories. Jesus met Paul in his wayward sinfulness and forgave him. And so, Paul says he was “*called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.*” The word “apostle” comes from the word *apostellein*, meaning someone who is “sent out” – someone sent to share a message. Despite his sinfulness, Paul is saying that God had a plan for his life – that he was “*set apart for the gospel.*”

You may be wondering, what does this have to do with Christmas? Everything! Jesus was born to share our human flesh, to dwell among us. What we are preparing to celebrate at Christmas is not the birth of a perpetual baby in a manger, but the Savior of the world, the Son of God, who suffered for us, who was, as Paul writes, “*declared to be God’s Son with power, according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead.*” Jesus was born that he might suffer death and live raised as God’s only Son for all people in this world.

We are celebrating the birth of the Savior of the world. He lives raised in every heart open to his grace. As Jesus called Paul, he has chosen and called you to be his apostles – each Sunday you are sent out from this place to live for him. You await his coming, yet he already lives in you. As you prepare for Christmas, I ask you, “Who do you live to serve every day?” How has God set your life set apart for the gospel?

For many on December 26th, as cultural and economic patterns of the world move on to the next thing, the Christmas tree lies discarded at the end of the driveway. Yet the real message of

Christmas remains unchanged. It is eternal: the One who was born a babe in Bethlehem, was the One crucified, died, and who was raised. He lives to be born in the manger of your heart every day. Christmas doesn't end on the 26th, Jesus is born to live each day with you.

All of us have seen Christmas programs – some with little children, some corny but well-meant, some on a large scale with a cast of many. What is the most memorable one you have seen? I'll share a couple as you think. During my seminary internship in Iowa, I remember a Christmas program with two rows of kindergarten children singing "Silent Night" in front of the congregation. The children in the second row were on a riser about a foot and a half off the floor behind the row in front of them. As the words "Sleep in heavenly peace" were sung, a little boy and girl at the top left of the second row broke the calm as the little girl pushed the boy off the riser – his arms flailing and voice crying out, "Whoa!" Sometimes you never know what will happen in a Christmas program with small children!

However, the most meaningful Christmas program I ever experienced took place one year during the annual Christmas service in the chapel at the Lutheran College and Seminary in Tokyo. The Nativity stories of Luke and Matthew were enacted as Mary and Joseph, amid their very human doubts and fears, responded to God's plan not only for them but for the whole world. The shepherds and Magi came and worshiped the baby Jesus and carols were sung. Then the lights briefly went down and Jesus the man appeared carrying a cross as the Passion story was told. The purpose of his birth was framed by his death and resurrection.

This is what Paul is recounting for us in today's reading from Romans. Paul recalls Jesus' birth as descended from King David, as the One who shares our flesh and humanity; as the One who died and was raised, and as the One who calls us to belong to him.

This is what we celebrate at Christmas. It is not simply a feel-good story that ends on December 26th; Christmas continues every day as he comes to the manger of your heart. Christmas is about a holy paradox: You await his coming, yet he already lives in you. You have his peace, yet his peace is disquieting. His peace gives you inner strength, yet his peace also sends you out to become strength for others. The disquiet of his peace shatters our clam complacency, awakening us to see the world's need of his grace and love.

Today's Hymn of the Day is a Japanese hymn I often sang in Japan, titled "In A Lowly Manger Born." This hymn is sung at Christmas, and throughout the year because he is always with us. The hymn ends with the words of verse three:

Then to rescue you and me, Jesus died upon the tree, see in him God's love revealed,
by his passion we are healed. Now he lives in glory bright, lives again in power and
might; come and take the path he trod, son of Mary, Son of God.

This is what we are preparing to celebrate at Christmas: the son of Mary is the Son of God. Born to share our humanity, he calls all people sons and daughters of God.

Like Mary and Joseph, you have also faced difficult struggles and decisions that have pushed you to prayer, pushed you to rely upon Jesus – Emmanuel, God with us. Paul's story and Mary and Joseph's stories are also our story. Jesus is born for each of us. No matter who you are or how you are, you are part of his salvation story. Jesus is born to make the impossible possibility of God's unconditional love real for every person in this world. He is born to save you from your sins and to send you out into the world with his love.

This is the meaning of Christmas. Jesus is the greatest gift you will ever receive. He will hold you in his love all your life – on all your journeys. He will lift you so you can lift others. He offers you light in the darkness so you can be light for others.

Christmas is almost here, yet Christ is already here. Jesus, the Savior of the world, is alive. You await him, yet he already dwells in the manger of your heart. You seek him, yet his goodness and mercy have followed you all your life.

He is the living Word in the bread and the wine. His grace gives you a disquieting peace, sending you out in service to your neighbor every day, of every year.

He has set you apart for the gospel. Rejoice that he is born for you. Merry Christmas. Amen.