23 December 2018                St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Advent 4                             Vienna, VA

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“Planning and Preparing for Christmas”
Text: Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-56; Micah 5:2-5a

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

Plans and preparations for Christmas have been going on for a while now. Retailers have been planning and preparing for months now, if not from the day after last Christmas. And unless you are one of those brave souls who wait until the last minute, you have been preparing, too. Preparing your home with decorations. Planning and preparing to travel. Planning and preparing for guests. Planning and preparing gifts to give and wrap, special food, and the list goes on and on.

The church has been planning and preparing, too. The season of Advent is to prepare us and our hearts for the comings of the Lord - to remember in His coming in the flesh at Christmas, to rejoice in His coming to us with His forgiveness in His Word and Sacraments, and to be ready for His coming again in glory. So the call goes out to repent, for that is how a heart is prepared for the Lord. And while this is a different kind of planning and preparing than what the world is doing, it is no less important. It is, in fact, far more important. For we are planning and preparing not just for a day, but for a day which will never end. And not just for a new thing or two, but for a new and eternal life. And the morning of that day will make all our Christmas mornings now seem like very small potatoes, indeed.

But there is one more who has been planning and preparing: God. And if you marvel at how long the stores and retailers begin planning and preparing for Christmas these days, how early the trees go up and the music starts, know this: God has been planning and preparing even longer. In fact, He has been planning and preparing from the very beginning. From the moment Adam and Eve fell into sin, God started planning and preparing for Christmas - for the birth of His Son into the world to be their Saviour. To provide for them new clothes to cover the shame of their sin, and a new life that would not break or wear out, but last forever.

What we call that planning and preparation is the Old Testament. And the writing we heard from Hebrews today hinted at that; of that way of thinking about the Old Testament. For we heard: Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Or in other words, the sacrifices and offerings were part of the planning and preparation,
not the thing itself. They are not what God desired or took pleasure in. They were important, just as our planning and preparation is important, but not as important as the thing itself. Imagine a well-prepared meal that is not eaten, a well-wrapped gift that is not unwrapped, or traveling to see family but never actually going into their home - that is what the Old Testament is without the New, without its fulfillment, without the one all those sacrifices and offerings were preparing for. Without Jesus. For all those years and in all those ways, in all that we hear in the Old Testament, God was planning and preparing for Christmas.

And Mary helps us see this too, in the words she spoke that we heard in the Holy Gospel today. Most of those words were simply taken from the Old Testament - Mary reflecting on all that God had done leading up to and preparing for the child that was now living and growing in her womb. Not just her son, but God’s Son. From generation to generation, she said. As he spoke to our fathers. Down through the ages. Mary magnifies the Lord and rejoices in God [her] Saviour, for how wonderful to see all those plans and preparations now coming to fulfillment.

She remembered how God had shown strength with his arm in rescuing His people - the people from which His Son would come - time and time again. From all their enemies, from satan, and even from themselves, when they would follow one boneheaded move with another. But still God was planning and preparing for Christmas.

And then, too, how God had scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. How often His people got too big for their britches and thought they didn’t need God, or thought too much of themselves and too little of God. And so God intervened to scatter those thoughts and desires, planning and preparing for Christmas.

And how God brought down the mighty from their thrones. None could withstand His power nor derail His planning and preparation. And when He brought them down, who He raised up and exalted! No one would have picked the folks He did, so humble, so nothing in the eyes of the world. Yet all was according to plan. Feeding and filling the hungry with good things. Sending the rich empty away. It was all in remembrance of His mercy. To fulfill His promise of mercy. His promise of a Christmas. When Christ, the Saviour, would be born.

And at just the right time, when all the planning and preparations were completed, the day all the planning and preparations, all the sacrifices and offerings, all the patriarchs and prophets, all the prophecies and events, all the Old Testament was for, came. In Bethlehem, as the prophet Micah had said. In Bethlehem, a child who is older than his mother would be born. In Bethlehem, too little, too humble, some would say. But it was the place planned for and prepared by God. For Christmas. For the one born to be our peace.
So nothing by accident, nothing by chance, for God’s adventing, His coming at Christmas. He’d been planning and preparing for a very long time.

And He’s not done yet. There’s more preparing to be done. Not for Christmas, of course. We do that. The Father had His Christmas. Now the Son and the Spirit are the ones doing the preparing.

For Jesus told His disciples on the night before His crucifixion that He is going to prepare a place for us, and that He will come again and take us to Himself, that where He is we may be also (John 14:1-3). And He did that by taking His Christmas-born body, prepared for Him, to the cross, to the grave, and then to life again. Making peace between God and man again through the forgiveness of sin, and making eternal life possible for us by overcoming death in His resurrection. So now He is preparing for us, for our Christmas, our new birth, in heaven. The Son of God born a son of man, so we children of men might be born from above as children of God.

And that preparation is the work of the Spirit now in us, sanctifying us, as we heard in the reading from Hebrews. The Spirit taking what Jesus did in His Christmas-body and giving it to us. Christmas gifts that can be purchased not with gold or silver, not with MasterCard or Discover, but only by the blood of the innocent suffering and death of God’s Son. The gift of forgiveness, the gift of life, the gift of salvation. The Spirit wrapping them in water, in words, and in bread and wine to give them to us. To make us new for a new life. That we be prepared for that new life when Jesus comes again - when He advents not humbly as the child born of Mary, but in majesty as the eternal Son of God. The last promise of the scroll of the book, fulfilled.

And when He does, it will not be John, but us leaping for joy. John leaped for joy when Jesus came to him, as will we when Jesus come to us, and for us. And so joy is what we have now as the Spirit brings Jesus and His gifts to us now, still exalting those of humble estate, still filling the hungry with good things, still mercy those who fear Him and fulfilling every promise. Just as His mother said.

But there’s something else, one more thing God has prepared for us. I’ll let the apostle Paul tell you in his own words:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God - the Christmas gift of God - not a result of works - not by sacrifices or offerings - so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship - His children, born of Him - created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Or in other words, the good that God has done for us we get to do for others. It is what children learn at Christmas. Children of God, too. That it isn’t just about the joy of
getting gifts, but the joy of giving them. And as we have received, so we now give. And in that giving, the joy of John, the joy of the Lord, is ours. And when sin gets in the way, when holiday disappointments get in the way, when burdens and busyness get in the way, when distractions and problems get in the way, when sadness and grief get in the way, especially then, don’t beat yourself up or think yourself like Bethlehem - too little, too humble, or too far gone to be of any good. No. You’re not God’s child by accident or chance. Come again and receive the gifts you need, here. The forgiveness you need, here. The life you need, here. The joy you need, here. They are here for you, for He is here for you. Your Christmas God, your Christmas brother, and the real Spirit of Christmas.

And just as surely as that Christmas God was planning and preparing for came, so too will your Christmas. Not the one in two days, but the one on the Last Day. When we don’t just get to hear the song of the angels, we get to sing with them. When we don’t just hear about the shepherds and the wise men who saw Jesus, we get to see Him ourselves. When all is fulfilled. Just as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever. The Christmas He’d been planning and preparing all along. For you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.