

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

Our Epistle today begins: *Paulos doulos*—Paul, a servant.
Or you might say: *Paul, a slave*.

Paul—the greatest missionary, evangelist, and apostle the Church has ever known—
a servant, a slave of Christ Jesus.

We don't talk about slaves much anymore.
It's sort of taboo.
It was fine for Paul in his day, but we're not slaves to anybody.

We're about freedom and individual choices and success.
In certain people we see greatness, success, drive, charisma.
Every great leader tries to pass on his greatness, offering a formula for others to follow.

But none of the stories I've seen begin with the words: *Paul, a slave*.
Sure, they may begin:
 "I was a slave..."
 "I was imprisoned..."
 "I was poor and mistreated and abused..."

But, they all continue:
 "...but now, I'm free/rich/successful, etc."

Paul, even at his height, even in his most famous and influential writing, begins:
 "*Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus*."

He hasn't progressed beyond that.
Why?

Luther was similar.
He, too, saw himself as a servant, a slave.
In fact, Luther's last words were: *wir sind bettler, hoc est verum*.
That's a mix of German and Latin, but it means: *We are beggars, this is true*.

Christians don't move past begging.
We don't progress beyond obedience to our Lord and Master—nor do we want to.
Everything we are and everything we have depends entirely on His giving to us by grace.

But what is it that God desires to give?
And how does He go about giving it?
And why does He give it?

The answers to those three questions tie together our readings for today.

First, what He gives is Himself.

Isaiah saw it long before.

Though he couldn't give you the names of Mary or Joseph—
 he did witness the virgin conceive and bear a son,
 whose name was called Immanuel: *God with us*.

St. Matthew tells us a bit more:

"Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way," he says.

The virgin's name is Mary.

She was engaged to just man named Joseph.

Before their marriage she was found to be pregnant, so Joseph was ready to call it all off.

Then an angel came and told him that this child is from the Holy Spirit;

His name would be Jesus, *"for He will save His people from their sins."*

Here we see that what God gives is *Himself*.

(Now, it's important to point out that He doesn't give *a part of Himself*.

It's not 20% of God that's born of the virgin, or any other fracture or piece of God.

God doesn't come piecemeal and you can't portion Him out or divide Him up.

St. Paul tells the Colossians,

"For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell..." [Col 1:19])

In this Jesus—

the Son conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin,

who descended from David according to the flesh

and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of

holiness by His resurrection from the dead (Rom 1:4)—

God is with us.

But apart from this Jesus, God is *not* with us.

And wherever Jesus is,

there is also the forgiveness of our sins,

the salvation of our souls,

and life everlasting.

Now the second question becomes vitally important:

How does God give Himself to us that we might have all this?

Our readings say: by the Holy Spirit, Mary, Isaiah, Paul, and Matthew.

God gives Himself to us through the conception of the Holy Spirit,

by the womb of the Virgin Mary,

and by the witnesses to these events—namely, Isaiah, Paul, and Matthew.

God gives Himself to us through the witness or the testimony or the preaching of Jesus.

That's why St. Paul begins his letter to the Romans:

"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus,

called to be an apostle, set apart for the Gospel of God." (Rom 1:1)

He's a slave of this message,
 bound to proclaim the Gospel of God, which is Christ for us—
 that God is with us in Jesus to save us from our sins.

Preaching is telling the story of God—delivering what He has done for us.
 And in Christ, God has served the world as if He were the slave and the sinful world His master.
 The story of the birth of Jesus is the story of almighty God depending on the milk of His mother.
 It's the infinite Lord, located in frail, infant flesh, laying in the wood of the manger.
 And that wood of the manger foreshadows the wood of the cross—by which He saves us.

It's in the preaching of this message that gives God to us.
 So that we obtain this faith and salvation, the Lord instituted the office of preaching the Gospel.
 Whether it's the preaching of the Prophets or the Apostles, Isaiah or Paul or Matthew,
 or even the called and ordained servant of the Word standing before you today,
 it's the Lord's Word that delivers what it says.

God gives Himself to us through the preaching of the Gospel by the called servant of the Word.

So we've got the *what*, and the *how*—but *why*?

Isaiah tells us:

*“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign...
 The Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house
 such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—
 the king of Assyria.”* (Isa 7:14, 17)

The promise of the Son, according to Isaiah, is for judgment.
 God is with Israel, in order to destroy the sinful idolatry of His people—
 that they might fear, love, and trust in Him above all things.

Matthew tells us that this Son is given because *He will save His people from their sins* (Mt 1:21).

And Paul says that we received the apostolic word *to bring about the obedience of faith
 for the sake of His name among all the nations,
 including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.*” (Rom 1:5b-6)

These three witnesses don't oppose each other.
 God gives Himself to us, through the preaching of His Word,
in order to expose our false gods,
 save us from our sins,
 and bring forth the life of faith—both throughout the world and among us as well.

So, putting the *what*, *how*, and *why* together:
 God is for us in Christ for the sake of the life of the world.

With that sort of Lord and Master—
 who desires to give Himself to us for our salvation,
 who offers peace and grace and a participation in His very life—
 who would want to be anything but an obedient slave and a witness of His word?

Everything we are and everything we have depends entirely on His giving to us by grace.
And when we cling to that then we've got the grace and peace promised to all the saints.

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