**Ascension – December 24, 2017 AM service**

**Blessed Beyond Many Prophets and Kings**

Text: Luke 10:23-24

On that first Christmas 2,000 years ago, everything was ready for the Savior’s birth. Roman roads had been built throughout the vast Roman world in preparation for the feet of Christ’s messengers to carry the Gospel. The Greek language had become almost universal in readiness for the proclamation of the Good News to the world. There was outward peace throughout the Roman Empire which encompassed most of Europe, as well as Northern Africa and parts of Asia. That outward peace came at the expense of conquest, however, and the people of Jesus’ homeland seethed with rage and hatred toward their oppressors. They cried for deliverance.

Jesus Christ was born at just the right time under the right conditions for spreading his saving word. But at his birth only Heaven appeared to be interested. In fact, God had to arrange a welcome himself, and so he sent angels to circle the skies and herald Jesus’ coming. The angels rustled up a handful of shepherds to come visit the stable. And God set a special star in the sky, but only a few stargazers from the East noticed and came to bring their gifts.

The world didn’t notice or know Jesus’ birth. Work went on as usual. There was no tremendous upheaval announcing a new order. Kings and potentates continued to rule as before. And it’s somewhat the same today. Millions will go through the motions of excitement and joy this Christmas without really knowing or caring about the One who makes true peace and lasting joy possible. But those of us who gather here to worship are BLESSED BEYOND MANY PROPHETS AND KINGS. We know Jesus as the greatest of the prophets, the mightiest of all the mighty, the Savior of the world, God come to live as a human in order to rescue us. Today we will see that JESUS FULFILLED THE LONGINGS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS AND KINGS. And then we will marvel that WE HAVE SEEN AND HEARD EVEN MORE THAN THEY IMAGINED.

 The desire for a Savior goes all the way back to the first humans. The longing for One who would rescue us by being the perfect sacrifice for the world’s sin was passed on from generation to generation throughout the 4,000 plus years of the Old Testament.

The prophet Isaiah, for example, wrote 700 years before the first Christmas: *“The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel”* (7:14). *“To us a child is born, to us a son is given.... And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this”* (9:6-7). And then Isaiah and all the other Old Testament prophets waited, longing to see with their own eyes and hear with their own ears the fulfillment of their prophecies.

The Apostle Peter tells us that the Old Testament prophets searched their own writings to try to figure out when the Christ would come: *“The prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow*” (I Pet 1:10-11).

Devout kings also waited and longed for the Savior to come. In Psalm 69 King David gives a prophetic glimpse at the coming Savior as he suffers on the cross. In the inspired words of David, the Suffering Savior calls out: *“You know how I am scorned, disgraced and shamed;* all my enemies are before you. *Scorn has broken my heart and has left me helpless; I looked for sympathy, but there was none, for comforters, but I found none. They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst”* (19-21). In that same psalm David describes his longing for that Savior to get here*: “But I pray to you, O LORD, in the time of your favor; in your great love, O God, answer me with your sure salvation. Rescue me from the mire, do not let me sink; deliver me from those who hate me....Do not hide your face from your servant; answer me quickly, for I am in trouble. Come near and rescue me, redeem me because of my foes* (13-18). King David knows for sure, as an absolute fact, that God will rescue his people through the Suffering Savior. David just longs for that to hurry up and happen. Psalm 132 speaks an added reason for David’s longing. The Messiah, the Anointed One, will establish the eternal kingdom of God and gather all believers into it for eternity. God had promised that. *“The Lord swore an oath to David, a sure oath that he will not revoke: ‘One of your own descendants I will place on your throne...forever and ever’”* (11-12). Psalm 23 confirms what David was expecting: *I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever* (6).

 The longing of the Old Testament believer to see with his own eyes the Christ is vividly described by Job: *“I know that my Redeemer lives,” he writes, “and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.....I myself will see him with my own eyes -- I and not another. How my heart yearns within me!”* (19:25-27).

 THOSE LONGINGS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS AND KINGS WERE FULFILLED IN BETHLEHEM on Christmas Day, 2000 years ago. That Baby born in Bethlehem’s stable was the long-awaited Messiah, the Lord’s Anointed, the Savior of the world. He was full and complete God, born into this world to rescue sinners. All have sinned -- all deserve damnation at the hands of an angry and just God. But Jesus came to rescue us. He came to satisfy the Law’s demands for us. He came to endure the death-penalty it required. Jesus’ perfect fulfilling of the Law is credited to the believer’s account, as if we have been perfect people.

 Jesus proved that he was the Christ, not just by the virgin birth and all the other miraculous signs of the first Christmas, but by his entire life. Our text today came 30 years after the first Christmas, during Jesus’ public ministry. Jesus sent 72 of his followers out to preach the Good News. They had come back amazed and excited. *“Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name,”* they reported. Even Satan and his followers were overcome by the powerful word the 72 preached, but, Jesus said, those early missionaries would see even greater things. *“I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you.”* As they preached the Gospel, Jesus would be backing up their preaching with signs and wonders. He would be protecting them in time of danger. Even more wonderful, he would be snatching sinners from Satan’s grasp and bringing them to faith and eternal rescue. The early days of the Christian Church were extraordinary days, and Jesus used extraordinary means to get his Church established and his Gospel preached.

The believers of Jesus’ day were truly blessed. Their eyes saw and their ears heard the Savior, the One the Old Testament prophets and kings could only dream about. Those New Testament believers were blessed beyond many prophets and kings. But we are even more blessed than they FOR WE HAVE SEEN AND HEARD EVEN MORE THAN THEY IMAGINED! Through the pages of the completed Bible (Old AND NEW Testaments) and through the faith worked in us by the miracle of Baptism, we have stood at the manger and beheld Jesus’ birth. We have witnessed his many mighty miracles. We have heard his victorious cry from the cross, *“It is finished,”* declaring the completion of his redemptive work. We have gazed into the empty tomb which proclaimed his triumphant resurrection. We have seen his majestic ascension into heaven as the conquering hero, returning Home, his victory over sin, death, Satan and hell completed. We have experienced the power of his love in our lives and have observed its saving power in the lives of others. We have seen his kingdom established in the entire world and his gospel being preached everywhere. We have seen how the Christian Church, established on Pentecost, has grown continuously ever since. We have seen that Jesus has strengthened the weak, befriended the lonely, and comforted the dying.

Christ came at a most opportune time to let his light shine in the darkness. Socially, politically, and morally the world of that day had degenerated to the point where even heathen philosophers acknowledged that it was beyond repair. Religion was blasphemed. Morality had degenerated into senseless violence and selfish luxury. Marriage was no longer regarded as sacred, and sexual sins were commonplace. Spiritual darkness covered the earth. Also in the Holy Land, that special land chosen and favored by God in the Old Testament, religion had degenerated into mere formalism, that is, outwardly going through the motions while the heart remained unmoved and unchanged. God’s word had been set aside, and those who were supposed to be the religious leaders of the people were teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. And into that darkness came Christ, in him was life and that life was the light of the world.

We also live at a most opportune time to let our light shine as a reflection of Jesus’ light. It is still dark out there in the world. Actually the darkness seems to be growing. God’s morality is laughed at. God’s truth is blasphemed, even among the Christians. In many churches people will hear this Christmas season that Jesus is just a human being and an example for us to follow as we try to earn our way into Heaven – if by chance there is such a place as Heaven. Christmas is the world’s most universal and widespread holiday, but how many know and believe its true meaning?

Someone has quipped: “You never realize how fortunate you are at Christmas time until you enter a gift shop and see how many things your friends haven’t sent you.” I hope all your gifts this year will be very nice. I am sure that one Christmas present will be fantastic. We will receive God’s Son, true God, eternal God, come to save us and to give us peace and strength. Because of this gift WE ARE MORE BLESSED THAN THE PROPHETS AND KINGS OF OLD. Moreover, God has given us a family of fellow-believers who believe the Bible and hold to all it says! The fellowship we share in our congregation and in the WELS because of our oneness in faith is also a blessing which many prophets and kings of old did not enjoy. The God-pleasing kings and prophets of the past were often forced to walk alone.

It’s time to let our light shine. We are blessed beyond many prophets and kings. We have a clear and complete revelation of the Gospel in the Bible. We know Jesus Christ - who he is and what he did so that we can be the Children of God. Each day is another opportunity to live as such children, and in this way, thank and praise God for the perfect Christmas gift he sent us. Each day is another opportunity to give our witness in a world where EVERYONE NEEDS a powerful, divine Savior like we have! Is there someone you can invite to our celebration of Jesus’ birth tonight or tomorrow morning?