

Grace and peace to you my friends and fellow sojourners from Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us.

Have you heard of AI, Artificial Intelligence? Now, before you ask, I am not referring to the kind of intelligence most women, especially spouses, attribute to men, **especially** their spouses. I did, however, have AI rattling around in my brain so I used Google to get the following definition: "In Layman terms, AI can be defined as a branch of computer science that can simulate human intelligence. AI is implemented in machines to perform tasks that actually require human intelligence. For instance, some of the primary function includes the likes of reasoning, learning, problem-solving and quick decision making." I have had this train of thought for two reasons: first, Nels has mentioned AI in several conversations he and I have had concerning what we do on social media as a church; and second, our son, Joe, and I had a conversation about AI this week as well. I decided to conduct an experiment.

First, I went to ChatGPT and asked for common themes or theologies in our texts for today. I did this by just listing the text references like Isaiah 61:10-62:3, and so on. The response I got in the blink of an eye said: "Those passages share themes of redemption, salvation, and the fulfillment of God's promises." It also provided brief paragraphs with more specific details for each text I had identified within that context. It then closed with the following summary: "Overall, these passages collectively emphasize the coming of the Messiah, the fulfillment of God's promises, the recognition of Jesus as the embodiment of salvation, and the call for praise and rejoicing for God's redemptive work among God's people. They highlight the interconnectedness of Old Testament prophecies with the New Testament fulfillment in Jesus Christ." I am sure that you have heard the phrase that great minds think alike and within that context I believe this is a very accurate and succinct analysis of our readings today and is only lacking any kind of reference to direct and personal application. I guess that is my job.

I then asked a follow-on question as to what a fifteen minute sermon on these texts might look like. It, once again, quickly provided an outline with specific scriptural points for each text. Needless to say, this was a very interesting experiment which did produce similar concepts to those provided in the seven or eight commentaries I looked up, printed and read and analyzed on these same texts. My standard homiletic preparation.

In both cases, AI used the same big words – redemption, salvation, and fulfillment of God's promises. Now I am going to ask you to ponder a question about these words but before I do I want to repeat them again for you to hear – redemption, salvation, and fulfillment of God's promises. Here is the question: are these words talking about different things or are they different ways of describing or defining the very same thing? **Wait – Wait – Wait**

Okay, now it is time for my answer to that question. First, I believe redemption and salvation are one and the same thing. Second, I believe God's end goal for all of God's many different promises is simply our redemption, salvation. And another way to say that in a word I use quite often is relationship – that God desires to have relationship with us. When we are in relationship with God, we are redeemed, we are saved.

As we journeyed through Advent and Christmas Eve, would you all agree that the principle theological premise I used was God comes to us? The opposite of this was Martin Luther's original issue. The Bible is jammed packed with nuanced references to human action for salvation, yet try as he might, Luther could not find peace and salvation in his own efforts. He finally realized that those nuanced references came from a Judaic, Old Testament perspective. When Luther was able to set aside those nuanced references and focus on what the New Testament message, the Good News, the Gospel was, is – then Luther began to more fully understand God's grace. Where does God's grace begin or come from?

I believe God's grace began at creation and continues to unfold every time God comes to us. And when we respond to those in need, any kind of need, to help them, then we are sharing God's grace to us with them as well. In other words, we have become witnesses to God's grace or are witnessing to those around us about God's grace just like John witnessed about Jesus.

Now, I also think an important thread of context exists for our consideration. One commentator described this thread as the civil/sacred responsibility demonstrated by Joseph and Mary. Our Christmas Eve Gospel lesson began with the call for a census by the civil, ruling authorities and Joseph and Mary did respond as expected. Now in our Gospel reading today we find Joseph and Mary once doing what is expected yet this requirement comes from the law of Moses and is met in the Temple in Jerusalem Yet in our story today, we have two powerful religious persons, Simeon and Anna, proclaiming that there is simply more than meets the eye in this child, Jesus. And then we are left with these words: "**The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was on Jesus.**" Are we becoming strong? Are we being filled with wisdom?

A contextual side note, does anyone know what church historical moment is traditionally recognized on December 28th? It is Holy Innocent's Day to recognize the many Jewish children killed by Herrod after the birth of Jesus. I have been pondering how often in human history children have borne the brunt of human anger? I cannot even begin to identify such events before the birth of Jesus or even many of them since Jesus' birth but here are a few with their dates: Herrod's slaughter of thousands around 7-2 BE, Columbine 1999, Sandy Hook 2012, Pakistan 2014, and in Palestine and Israel today. I am sure there are many others, many of which are probably more significantly horrible than these. The fact remains, however, that these are all indicators of our natural evilness.

Hear then the good news:

Martin Luther wrote: "God has given us no other way upon which we might go to heaven but the blessed Word, the holy Gospel."

In this statement; God, Word and Gospel are capitalized.

Word is capitalized referring to Jesus not the Bible.

Gospel is capitalized as a descriptor of Jesus. In other words, the Gospel, the Good News is, in fact, Jesus.

How do we know this is true - because we know that God came, comes to us in Jesus.

Jesus is the embodiment of the Good News, the Gospel, our redemption and salvation, **and** the fulfillment of God's promises.

All of the action in **our** relationship with God is God's.

Martin Luther said it this way: "If Grace depends on our cooperation then it is no longer grace."

Grace and peace to you, my friends. God is here.

Amen