Ok, we’re continuing to prepare for the coming of God into our lives this Advent and Christmas season. And if you recall, our preparation so far has been beginning to incorporate the darkness, and evil, and sin of the world into our awareness. To prepare for God is to walk into the darkness of our lives and world and it’s troubles. Because that is where the light shines. The light shines in the darkness, so Advent preparation is walking into the darkness to find the light. Last week I talked about hope and how hope begins by looking at what ails us. The metaphor I used was the vaccine. In order to bring hope in the form of the vaccine someone had to study the disease and know it well. Perfect metaphor in my mind anyway for the Advent Season and what it means to prepare for the coming of God into our lives. I

So I would like to spend a little time today talking about the darkness. We talk about it as sin of course, but that word has become pretty trivial today, it often simply means things I don’t like. There is very little content to the word anymore. We’ll nobodies perfect. That’s really about as far as sin often goes. So I would like to look at what ails us a little more specifically today. So when we say at Christmas “a truly wonderful things has happened” it can truly be a wonderful, life changing reality that we receive at Christmas. Something hopeful, new, and healing.

So what ails us? I’m going to put up a picture on the screen today to try to capture what our Lutheran tradition has classically taught as sin. Now before I do this I have to say that this is not complete. Sin is way too deceptive and clever and sneaky in to order to be reduced to a simple answer. So what I’m doing is not the final word on this. But this image does point to what our Lutheran tradition has classically understood sin to be. So let me put the image up on the screen. It’s a picture with a caption and please look at both. They both have to go together.

OK. Here it is. It’s a picture of man wearing a mask, but it’s not covering his mouth or nose. And the caption says, “I’ am wearing a mask”. So what is going on here? First of all, there’s nothing wrong really with wearing a mask like that right? That’s not the issue here. There might be times when wearing a mask like that is just fine. What’s is the issue here that is so interesting? Well, someone told this guy that he is suppose to wear a mask. And he doesn’t really want to wear a mask I’m guessing. So he’s figuring out a way to do what he’s supposed to do, without really doing it. He’s following the rule, but avoiding what it’s about. It’s this dodge. Can’t you hear this? “You said I’m supposed to wear a mask, and I’m wearing a mask”. He’s wearing a mask, following the rule. But not following at all. And people are masters at this game.

The darkness has to do with this game that we play. This dodge and weave that we do in our minds. Yeah so someone walks up to you and says, “Hey, what’s up?” And you might say what, “the sky”. The sky. That’s clever. But that’s not what’s going on. That’s not what the person was asking you at all, and you know it. It’s a way of answering the question without answering it. It’s a way of doing exactly what your asked to do without doing it at all. And we joke around with this, but the reason it’s so funny is that it’s so true. We’re doing exactly what you say, but not doing it all. I don’t want to tell you what’s up. Same with the mask. I don’t really want to do what I’m being asked to do. So I do it in such a way that I’m doing it, did exactly what you asked, but didn’t really do it at all.

This is one of first issues Jesus deals with in his teaching. 1st teaching from the sermon on the mount addreses the darkness. He says “You have heard it said you shall not kill”. “But I tell you that if you call your neighbor a fool you are liable to the hell of fire. Same thing as the mask. People think they’re suppose to follow the 10 commandments. And so they don’t kill anyone, but the call their neighbors fools and idiots. I do it without doing it at all. Jesus talked about this darkness in Matthew 15:8 when he said, these people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me”. They were doing religion, without doing it at all.

What happened? What happens? What’s the source of this game playing? And now we come to the true source of the darkness I think in our world. To put it simply, we get this way when we are dominated. When those over us rule by force. By fear and intimidation. Authority becomes authoritarian. It’s a form of parenting. It’s a form of teaching. Of religion. It’s one race over another. Historically it’s been men over women. It’s power understood as power over you. So you learn how to go along without really going along at all. Because you understand authority as power over.

It’s important to understand this domination game, if you want to understand the light of Christmas. This, in general, is the darkness. This is what ails us. This domination game, this need to have our way. But now we can understand the light. And in our text today what it is, is a different kind of authority. A new understanding of authority. A new understanding of what it means to be ruled and to obey. God the ruler sends a messenger to a virgin whose name was Mary. Now in this culture, there would have been no one more dominated and controlled. Mary is at the bottom of the pecking order. She would be ordered around by everyone. Everyone was her boss. And the messenger brings the light with these words, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. Notice how this perplexing this is for her. She is completely baffled by this, completely puzzled. What kind of greeting is this? Greetings favored one? She doesn’t get it.

But this is the light that shines in the darkness. This is the coming of a new kind of king. For the same message that came to Mary is the same message the angel brings to you. Greetings favored one, the Lord is with you. And I think no matter how many times you hear it, it’s always a little hard to believe. God favors me? God is with me? Notice that this Lord is not over you, but with you. This is the light that shines in the darkness. This is an entirely different concept of power and rule. It’s not domination is it? It’s being with. You are my chosen, I am with you. That’s the word to you today. You are my beloved with you I am well pleased. All of her life Mary did her best to be pleasing I am sure. To stay out of trouble. To be OK. To survive. To do as she was told. Now she discovers that she was favored just because she is Mary. That God is not over her, but with her. That’s the message. That we are pleasing to God. And it doesn’t matter where or what we are at the time. Greetings favored one, the Lord is with you. All around us, and probably within us is the darkness of domination. I want my way. But in the darkness we can discover the light of Christmas. I am with you. Not over you. I came to be with you.

Which leads to the next part of text, the reality of the Virgin birth. Mary will have a child by the Holy Spirit. The result of being favored is that Mary will be blessed with bearing the Son of God. Now unfortunately, this has become something limited to something amazing that happened 2,000 years ago. And the most unfortunate thing is that it’s become something we understand to be highly unusual. Something extremely rare, but with God all things are possible. Something really distant and far away from real life. It belongs to the magic of Christmas Eve, or something.

But it’s not that at all, don’t think so. This week in my study I came across a quote by Gergory of Nyssa who was a very well known bishop in the early church in Nyssa around the 4th century. And listen to what he says about what the Virgin Birth is about. I’ll put it up on the screen. “What was achieved in the body of Mary, will happen in soul of everyone who receives the word”. What’s he saying? The Virgin Birth isn’t at all really all about something that just happened 2,000 years ago. Even in the earliest church the Virgin Birth wasn’t some really odd thing that just happened to Mary. It can happen to anyone. Male or female it doesn’t matter. God does the same thing in you that he did to Mary. God can form the reality of Christ in you, by the Holy Spirit. The Virgin birth is simply about God doing something in our lives that only God can do.

All things are possible with God. We have to look at that one too. Sometimes this can mean something like you too can win the lottery. You too can win cash and prizes. It fits in a little too easily at times with our American story of rags to riches. You too can make it to the top. You too can be president. All things are possible.

But it’s much simpler than that, and a little less self-serving, but much more interesting. With God all things are possible. In other words, you too can learn to think about authority differently. You too can hear the blessing given to you this Christmas. Greetings O favored one, God is with you. God will never dominate you. God instead is with you, wherever you are.

The domination game is still very much alive. There are many who only respond to force and domination this is so true. This isn’t pie in the sky. We need the force behind the law, in order that we not spin off into total chaos. But in that darkness that we all have to live in every day, God is with you. Pointing to a different way. A different kind of reality. Where you don’t have to dominate, or control, or have your way. Where you don’t have to boss people around. Instead you can be with them. And when you are really with people it’s amazing what can happen. It’s a whole different kingdom, a new kind of authority. The Virgin birth can even happen. The reality of Jesus Christ begins to be born in us today. Amen.