



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

"What Do You Hear and See?"

Scripture Lessons: *Isaiah 35:1-10: Mathew 11:2-11*

***This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on
Sunday, December 12, 2022 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in
Charleston, South Carolina.***

Messengers from John the Baptist

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

Jesus Praises John the Baptist

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see?

Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written,

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you."

Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

There is a place in Minnesota where you can essentially walk across the Mississippi River. It's located at a little rock dam indicating the end of Lake Itasca / it amounts to a little creek and it stretches maybe 20 feet across and a couple of feet deep.

Imagine if all we had been told or all we ever understood about the mighty Mississippi River was that place where its headwaters emerge? We would have absolutely no concept of what a tremendous river it really is.

I must admit that Christmas feels a little like that for me. Earlier this week I was delighting in the sanctuary and the good and hard work of our volunteers...there's the Chrismon Tree with its meaningful ornaments, the beautiful foliage of the Poinsettias, the candles on the Advent Wreath.

The things around us clearly say something about the season of Advent in which we find ourselves; still, as special as they are, they do not tell the whole story.

And this is by no means to belittle the symbols themselves – the bells, the hymns...these are all important symbols, but even more important is that which they signify / the message and the meaning to which they point.

John the Baptizer first appeared on the scene preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, which was, by the way, the very same proclamation of Jesus throughout his

ministry.

Now, John, for his part, had always been looking toward the ministry of Jesus...he was pointing to it – “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.” (Luke 3:16). In other words, “I’m not him!”

One of the ways John pointed ahead to Jesus was by looking to the past. Remember, John was straight out of central casting in terms of what an Old Testament Prophet might look like, and Jesus said it himself, “...if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come” (Mt. 11:14).

In mighty and Biblical proportions, the old and the new converged in the life and ministry of John. John, who though he was not the light, he came to testify to the light...and, praise be to God, that’s what the season of Advent is all about...that light which enlightens everyone, it was coming into the world!

Interestingly enough, in this morning’s NT Lesson John’s disciples need to know for sure: “Are you the one who is to come,” they say, “or are we to wait for another?”

Jesus answers them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”

As an aside, I’ve always been intrigued at the order of the things Jesus listed – the things he was doing – because, I don’t know about you, but it seems to me that the raising of people from the dead should be at the top of the list...or at the end of the list in this case, but it’s not!

It is almost as if Jesus is saying here that even more glorifying to God than the raising of the dead is that the poor have good news brought to them! ...In so many ways, this reiterates Jesus’ primary proclamation about repentance for the forgiveness of sins / the very good news of the Gospel!

What do you see me doing? You see me doing the things that I’m supposed to be doing -- and when we read a little further in Matthew’s Gospel, we come to know that these are the kinds of things that we should be doing...and that when we do them, and especially when we do them unto the least of these, we do them unto God!

For these reasons and others, Christmas can never be a matter of sentimental nostalgia. It is so much more than an honoring of the past, that appropriate and blessed celebration of God’s previous work in our midst. To be certain, Christmas is also about what God is doing right now...and what God will continue to do through us.

Many of us can remember those old Paul Harvey episodes. In their heyday, his radio broadcasts were said to have reached in upwards of 24 million people per week. He would invite us to stand by for the news and then he would proceed to tell a wonderful and illustrative story, usually about some historical figure or something of, let’s say, cultural significance, but there was always something about the story that we didn’t know – “the rest of the story,” as he would refer to it.

For example, Paul Harvey once shared some of the back-story of that classic Christmas movie, “It’s a Wonderful Life.” Many of us have probably seen it more than once, and there’s a reason for that.

In his rather winsome way Paul Harvey shared that after the film had languished on the vine for a number years, the film studio neglected to renew the copyright, and so the movie slipped into what is called public domain, and when that happened the movie became instantly accessible to a much broader audience – television networks began to show it freely and frequently...and we came to love it...all because someone forgot to renew the copyright, which was a whopping \$4.

I share that story with you because, at times, I feel like the world is something akin to a Paul Harvey episode. As a pastor, I look around and I see the vast array of Christmas displays, and, goodness knows, we can all experience something of the energy and the fervor of this sacred season, but there is so much more to the story of Christmas than meets the eye -- so much more of the "rest of the story" that needs to be told.

I feel like this Wednesday upcoming has a similar quality about it. We call it Victory Day, and we recall how it was that 240 years ago the last remaining British soldiers were evacuated to their ships...and Charleston was liberated...and the Revolutionary War was over!

We should know that many people had dis-affectionately dubbed the war the "Presbyterian Revolt" or the "Presbyterian Rebellion," due in no small part to the fact that no less than 12 of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were Presbyterian.

And, praise be to God, those folks were by no means wallflowers. A British officer once said about one of the signers, a Scottish clergyman by the name of John Witherspoon...he said:

"Dr. Witherspoon...the political firebrand who perhaps had not a less share in the Revolution as Washington himself. He poisons the minds of his young students and through them the Continent."

That officer spoke of Witherspoon as a teacher, because Witherspoon was also the President of College of New Jersey, known as Princeton University today.

To be certain, Witherspoon's is but one of the great many stories, without which we simply do not have a Victory Day celebration on Wednesday.

But I would add that Victory Day is not simply a matter of what happened before and during the Revolution, nor is it exclusively about the date December 14, 1782...it's not even about what transpired immediately after the Revolution.

Indeed, ours is also a story about what is happening now and what is going to happen in the weeks and months and years to come...it's the story that we are called upon to write.

And if we are going to write it well...then, yes, we will absolutely need to remember the past and celebrate our present, but we will also need to take with us into the future the actual living out of our foundational values, because, unlike that movie, It's a Wonderful Life, if we fail to renew our nation's copyright...it will be lost.

In much the same way, there's much more to the story of Christmas than the story of a child whose birth was prophesied centuries earlier...its not just about the date, December 25th, and celebrating the birth of the Savior of the world in a manger in Bethlehem. It is also about expecting the inbreaking power of God to make a difference in our life today and living the difference that that makes in our life...in all the days to come.

Consider it this way...if our understanding of Christmas is limited to what God has done in the past, then we will run the risk of missing out on the new things that God would present to us.

But if our understanding of Christmas is limited solely to what God is doing right now, then our vision about the breadth and scope of God's story of salvation -- the story which spans the whole of eternity -- it will be fuzzy at best.

What's more, if our understanding of Christmas is limited only to what God will one day do in the future, then the life we live and the choices we make -- we may run the risk of marginalizing them!

The point being, that the Christian life takes the whole story into account...the past / the present / and the future!

When John's disciples showed up and asked Jesus if he was the one who was to come or should they wait for another, Jesus didn't ask them to tell him what they had heard about him or

what they had previously seen. He asked them, “What do you hear?” “What do you see?”

In other words, what is happening presently that not only fulfills everything that was ever said about me, but that also tells you who I am / what it is that I came to do...and what it is that I will forever do?

I love how Philips Brooks put it, “O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray, cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel!”

Here’s another tidbit of trivia about the movie, *It’s a Wonderful Life*. It was originally entitled “*The Greatest Gift*” ...and that is what Christmas is all about!

It is about the gift of Jesus that was given to the world; it is about a baby that can be born into our life today; it is about a Savior who has chosen to abide with us now and in all the days to come – loving us, supporting and consoling us...guiding and directing us!

And that’s not just the rest of the story! No! That, dear friends...is the Gospel! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.