

FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“LOVE’S BEST COVERAGE PLAN”

Scripture Lesson: Ephesians 3: 18-19

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, December 15, 2024
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Ephesians 3: 18-19

18 I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Love’s Best Coverage Plan

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

A man was praying and asked God, "God, is it true that to you a thousand years is like a second?" And God replied, "Yes, my child."

The man thought for a moment and asked, "And is it also true that to you a million dollars is like a penny?" God smiled and said, "Indeed, it is."

Feeling clever, the man said, "Well then, God, can I have a penny?" And God replied, "Of course you can, my child. You’re going to have to wait a minute though."

It is not easy for the human mind to contemplate the vastness of God, how it is that God exists beyond all time and space and yet how God also exists within all time and space.

We are finite. We have limits. We can only be in one place at a time but there is no place beyond the purview of God. Consider that there is no place we can be where God is not. Huh, in a world where cell phone companies brag about anything from 90-99% coverage the coverage of God’s love exists no matter where we are!

Our Old Testament Lesson put it this way... “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.” To be certain, God’s loving and sustaining presence is all around us, and about that love, the Apostle Paul hoped for all of us that we might “have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth,” of God’s love.

At Christmastime we give God thanks and praise because something of those divine dimensions, the vastness of God’s love, it has been revealed to us in the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ! Now, just because Jesus was born, that doesn’t mean that God’s love suddenly came into existence. No! This love, this Word that became flesh and dwelled among us full of grace and truth. He is “Emmanuel,” which means God with us, which is to say that what we have present with us in the form of a baby born to a woman named Mary, is the very one whose divinity existed before the foundation of the world. Now, a love that exists from before the dawn of time is nearly impossible for us to comprehend, but that is exactly the love that takes center stage at Christmas. A love that is timeless and immeasurable and yet that love chose to step into time, precisely because God’s love for us is boundless!

Prophets foretold of this time that was to come. Micah told of the significance of Bethlehem and about the one who would come forth to rule in Israel. Isaiah talked about the light of God that was coming

into the world. Those ancient prophecies – the light, the Prince of Peace looked ahead to the promised Messiah, the Christ-child, which tells us that when we behold the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay, he really is the Lord, the earthly manifestation of God’s eternal light, God’s eternal kingdom! In this way and others, we witness from the very outset of the Christmas story that God’s love was breaking all kinds of presumed boundaries: male and female, rich and poor, young and old.

The angel’s declaration to the shepherds said it all: “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people...” The news of this birth was like new wine in old wineskins. It was expanding, and there was nothing anyone could do to stop it!

In addition to Mary and Joseph and the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, there was also the priest Zechariah and Elizabeth (the parents of John the Baptist), and they were said to be barren but none of that got in the way of God’s love! Those wise men from the east came from far away, and not only far away geographically, mind you, but also theologically. They were Gentiles, non-believers (at least for a time), and none of that got in the way of God’s love either.

This is part of the truth about the dimensions of God’s love: no one, not the Syro-Phoenician woman, not the woman at the well, not the man who was born blind, not the Centurion, not Herod, the college student, or the retiree, or that person just hanging on for dear life – not a one of those people (not a situation the world over) has ever existed that exists beyond the redemptive scope of God’s love. There are some people who feel about as far away from God’s love as they could possibly be. Maybe they are hurt or tired. Maybe they have turned their hearts from God. But know this, God never stops loving us no matter who we are, no matter where we are, nothing can separate us from God’s love!

That is also part of the majesty of the Christmas message. There is no distance that God’s love cannot and will not travel. Consider distance from heaven to Bethlehem, that God would assume our nature, the form of a servant and he would leave the glory of heaven to walk earth’s dusty roads. To heal the sick, release the captives, to proclaim a Gospel of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

As the carol says, Jesus is the one “who with the poor, and meek, and lowly, lived on earth our Savior holy.” God did this, because of his love for you and for me. Prior to Jesus’ coming, we could not reconcile ourselves with God, still can’t. We are too frail and fallen. We are far too human, apart from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord, our sin has a way of separating us from God. What I am saying is that God’s love was and is essential to the transformation of the human heart. We can’t move ourselves from a continual state of rebellion against God to that blessed state of becoming the kind of people that God would have us to be, apart from love, and only God’s love can do that!

Sometimes we forget that it is God’s love that casts out sin, it pushes it away and so we must ask ourselves the question: if we pretend that sin doesn’t matter, if we gloss over it as if it doesn’t exist, is that a truthful expression of love? Sin is deadly serious to God, so much so that this baby born in Bethlehem would eventually grow up and yield his life as an atonement for sin. That’s the lengths to which God’s goes to love us, sparing not even his own son but delivering him up for all of us. To put it another way, God’s love went to the grave and rose above it so that we would be able to share in that victory. And from that empty tomb we hear again that which we have heard from the beginning, that sin and death do not have the last word. No! “[God’s] steadfast love endures forever!” God’s love doesn’t get tired; it doesn’t release us from its grasp. It doesn’t go away and leave us to our own devices. God’s love is wider than the horizon, higher than the heavens, longer than time itself, deeper than the deepest ocean.

The Apostle Paul said to the church in Rome “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” It bears repeating, our contemplations of the breadth and length and height and depth of God’s love are themselves an indication of the work of God’s love in our life, that love from which nothing can separate us. And what comfort that must have been for the Apostle Paul! You see, Paul was very likely imprisoned when the Holy Spirit inspired to

him to say what he said about the dimensions of God's love to those churches in and around Ephesus, which tells me that in the midst of whatever kind of darkness prevails upon us, there is also a blessed light that shines in that darkness. A light that the darkness of this world did not, nor will it ever, ultimately overcome.

I know it seems strange to think about the boundless and limitless love of God as also being deeply personal, but it is. This reality is what led St. Augustine to write that, "God loves each of us as if there were only one of us." Think back to that first Christmas and consider how God revealed his love to and through individuals and seemingly ordinary people I might add, shepherds, who probably smelled like sheep; an apprehensive young man named Joseph; a young woman named Mary, who was a teenage girl from a humble town. The gift of God's love met them where they were, and, by God's grace, it engrafted their story into God's story.

Mary put it well, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Now, we need not mistakenly presume that Mary had a choice in the matter, as if God's redemptive plan hinged on Mary's willingness to be a part of it, but that Mary believed and trusted in God is a gift to us.

For we too need to realize that we are not our own. The gift of God's love has bought us with a price! And, friends, that is a love upon which we can build our life! A great many people in the world today build their lives on other things, and whatever it is, it might as well be shifting sand – it leaves them insecure and vulnerable. And if it hasn't yet, it will. Or they may choose to say, "I don't have anything to live for." But the story of God's love at Christmastime tells us loud and clear that Jesus was born and lived and died and rose again for what we do have to live for! That's the true depth of God's love. That's the foundation of hope and assurance which awaits all those who put their trust in the one who was born not just the King of the Jews but the King of Angels!

How deep is God's love for us? How high and how long and how broad is God's love? If we lived to be as old as Methuselah, we would never discern it. Even if we could, and even if we were as strong as Sampson, we could never wield that love. It is far too great! We will never fully and fully comprehend the various dimensions of God's love. At least not on this side of heaven. But we must keep trying! Heaven forbid we peruse the manger like we would some other drive through nativity; or worse yet, we place a "do not disturb" sign on the doors of our hearts. If we really want to be filled with the fullness of God's love, we need to first make room for it in our lives. We need to make room for Christ to be born in our hearts today. The famous carol puts it wonderfully well when it talks about the gift of God's love. "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given, when God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven. No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in."

Let us pray. Almighty God and Everlasting God, we praise you that the coming of your light into the world can illuminate even the darkest heart. Help us to learn of the expanse of your love for us, that we too might faithfully proclaim the birth of your son, Jesus Christ, both now and forevermore. Amen.