

FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE REVELATION OF EMMANUEL”

Scripture Lesson: John 1: 1-14

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, January 5, 2025
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

John 1: 1-14

The Word Became Flesh

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

The Revelation of Emmanuel

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

When we talk about the ultimate revelation of God's love, we are essentially talking about Christmas, we are talking about the love of God that became flesh, became Emmanuel, and dwelled among us full of grace and truth. We celebrate that, as the light of Jesus shined in the darkness, the revelation of God's love became differently apparent, both to his own people and world, and this happened by way of appearances or manifestations, epiphanies, if you will!

Like the star which shined at God's command, the one which led the Wise Men from the east to the place where Jesus lay, that was such a means of God manifesting his glory, it was an occasion where God's graceful self-revelation, it opened people's eyes to the realization that Jesus was the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords!

Christmas was about God revealing His love for us, it was about the appearance of God on the human stage in a way that God had never appeared before. God's divine entry into human history, the person and work of Jesus the Christ, and the light and life that he brought, it has changed the course of human history! And we who have known that story and who have been

changed by that story, it is incumbent upon us to share that story with others, so that they too might understand the difference that Jesus makes in the lives of those who love him!

But what do we say about Christmas? What do we say about the epiphany, the appearance, the very manifestation of God? Well, for starters, we can affirm that on that first Christmas, everything changed. The world that had seemed to revert to its pre-creation chaos. The sin that had tarnished the image of God in which we had been created, oh, unto all this fallenness, God came, and the world was reintroduced to the God who spoke it all into existence, and, once again, it was very good! The baby born in Bethlehem was and is Emmanuel, which means God with us, and that child, that holy infant, was also the Messiah, the one about whom the prophets had spoken. He was the one who would redeem, not just Israel, but, in fact, all those whom the Lord our God would call! And so, Christmas is not simply a matter of commemorating the birth of a baby, which we do well – it is also a matter of witnessing to the fulfillment of God’s divine promise.

This was the moment when God’s eternal plan to reconcile the world to himself broke into our world in a tangible and unforgettable way! We had always known that something profound was on the horizon; indeed, long before the shepherds saw on their horizon the multitude of the heavenly hosts, long before they heard that angelic chorus, long before the wise men journeyed from afar.

Long before any of that, we knew something was coming! In our OT Lesson that Regina/Helen read for us this morning, we heard again Isaiah’s proclamation: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’”

God’s reign! God’s peace! All that had been foretold was now breaking into history!

In our New Testament Lesson, we read John’s description of what was happening! Now, John, unlike Isaiah, wrote his Gospel in hindsight, he had seen Jesus for himself and had personally followed him as his Beloved Disciple, and listen to what he chose to say. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” John continues, “and the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

John helps us to understand that the peace that had come into the world, for example, was not a peace that was created or mandated by way of an edict from on high, and this was certainly not the world’s peace. No! We are talking about God’s peace, God’s salvation!

And that’s hard to get our brains around, that the God of all creation, the one who transcends all understanding, he decided not only to draw near but to become like one of us. Which is to say, that God didn’t sit upon his heavenly throne scratching his head and wondering to himself what could be done to save us! He didn’t wave and wish us well from a distance! He didn’t simply provide a divine imperative and nestle it within the pages of some book of the Bible!

And that’s by no means a slight to the Scriptures! In the reformed tradition we still hold to the mantra: “Sola Scriptura,” the conviction that Scripture alone, the Bible alone is the only rule by which we know how to live and how to love. No! The point I want to make is that the author of salvation, the giver of grace, didn’t just provide us with a blessed story. He wrote himself into the story!

God’s grace is not simply an historical accounting of judges and priests and kings and ancient prophecies! No! God is about, living a story!

“Hark the herald angels sing, ‘Glory to the newborn King! Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.”

One of the revealed blessings of this drama of redeeming love, a drama in which we find ourselves, is that we are not left to our own devices to figure it out, because, in our case, the author has stepped into the plot, and, in doing so, God has revealed to us the meaning of everything that has written and he tells us exactly where the story goes from here!

And where does it go from here? Well, consider again those wise men from the east, those pagan astrologers, with no apparent connection to God’s covenant whatsoever. Oh, they may have come as foreigners, but they left with faith, they worshipped and adored Jesus!

This is one of God’s most important epiphanies. That no matter how far apart we are or think we are, from God, be it geographically or theologically, God, the Holy One of Israel, has drawn as close to us as a baby in a manger. Whether we have a religious pedigree or not, it doesn’t matter. All that matters is that we find our rest in God!

John Calvin is a towering figure within the Reformed tradition, and he consistently asserts that the action, manifestation, and self-revelation of God, that that is absolutely essential to our salvation! And what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, is to show us, once and for all, that he is knowable! We learn from the person and work of Jesus that God is personable and relatable. The God who came at Christmas, we can touch him and see him and love him!

To be certain, the baby that was revealed to us in a stable, we saw him revealed in other personal ways as well, not just conceptually, but practically. God, in Jesus Christ, told us how to live by showing us how to live. Then, in the fullness of time, he died, so that we might be reconciled to God and live forever with God in heaven!

The Christmas Hymn puts it like this: *“No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground; He comes to make His blessings flow, far as the curse is found.”* In the babe born in Bethlehem, we behold the God who knows us and loves us, the one who became human like all of us, and yet was God like none of us. He was and is the very light of revelation, the light that regenerates us and restores us. His is the only light that can destroy the curse of sin wherever it is found!

In John 1:5 we read, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” The birth of Jesus and the arrival of that light is not just a moment in time; it’s the dawn of a new reality. The darkness that had covered the earth for so long, was pushed back by the radiance of God’s presence. And so, no longer are we lost in confusion, grasping at fleeting shadows of meaning. No longer are we left in the cold, wondering if God sees us or knows our pain, because in Jesus Christ, we have seen the light, and that light will never be overcome by the darkness. That dear friends should be at the heart of any message we share about Christmas. That Jesus came, and in so doing, we beheld the heart of God, His love and mercy, His plans for a life lived in joyful obedience to Him!

Because of God’s epiphany in our hearts, we now know God in a way that was not possible before. No longer do we need to wonder if God is for us or against us because we know the answer. God is for us, and God is with us! And because God is still with us, it means that we still live in that light. Even when it seems dark, even when it seems cloudy and we despair, we can rest confident in the knowledge that God is present with us, not as a casual or distant observer, but as our Savior!

Oh, pray we don't grow complacent or think of Christmas only once a year, for in this baby we see the love of God come down. We witness the only love that ultimately matters, love that transforms us! In other words, the story of Christmas, the birth of Christ, the revelation of Emmanuel. It was not just a historical event. It is a present reality in which we are called to live! The light has come, and we now have the blessed opportunity to joyfully walk in that light! That's the charge and the responsibility incumbent upon us for Christmas having been revealed to us.

To put it another way, Christmas has been revealed in our hearts and minds not just to stay there. We are not just readers of a miraculous story! We are not spectators! We, by God's grace, are participants transformed by God's love so that God's love might be revealed in us! And if that is to happen, then every day we will need to affirm with our life and our living what it means to step out of the darkness and into the light. What's more, God has determined that by sharing that light with others, we might become someone else's epiphany!

This world of ours harbors pain and resentment and jealousy and prejudice and pride. Ours is a world where people are set on fire and cars drive into crowds. Our world desperately needs to see the light of Christ! The good news is that the world already has it. The light does shine. There are splendid and miraculous everyday banquets of grace and the world needs to see them. The world needs to see that "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." We who have beheld the glory of God, and who know God and love God, are tasked with bearing witness to the glory of God, the very light of Christ that continues to shine through us! The epiphany, the manifestation, God's self-revelation, the Holy Spirit's testimony to Emanuel continues.

"O come, Desire of nations, bind all peoples in one heart and mind bid envy, strife, and discord cease fill the whole world with heaven's peace."

Pray God finds us up to the task! In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.