FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

"POWER THAT BENDS LOW"

Scripture Lesson: Isaiah 61: 1-3

This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, December 14, 2025 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Isaiah 61: 1-3

1 *The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me*
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives
and release to the prisoners,
2 *to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor*
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
3 *to provide for those who mourn in Zion—*
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.

Power That Bends Low

Leader: The word of the Lord.
People: Thanks be to God.

There's an old maritime story that sailors along the northeastern coast used to tell. It's about a lighthouse keeper who faithfully served at his post for forty years. Every evening, just as the sun sank into the sea and the fog thickened over the horizon, he climbed the narrow winding stairs to set fire to a great lamp.

He wasn't famous. His name wasn't carved on plaques or recorded in history books. But those sailors knew that the old keeper had power—real power. When he lit that lamp, ships could keep clear of the rocks, and families could sleep easier knowing that a watchful eye was guarding the shoreline. It is said that, when he retired, the sailors in that region held a small celebration, and one of them raised his glass and made a simple toast: "To the keeper of the light, who served us by seeing farther than we could see."

It turns out the keeper of the light really did have power. While his was a power that saw farther, it was also a power that expressed itself in care for the vulnerable. On this Third Sunday of Advent, what is Advent if not heaven's light seeing beyond the fog of this world, showing us weary sinners how to come home? What

is the incarnation if not the Almighty and Everlasting God taking the form of a helpless babe, bending low for the sake of the lowly? Having lit the "Love" candle this morning, what is God's Love if not His power being used in service to the powerless?

Such was the nature of the light of God that was breaking into the world on that first Christmas morning. As Jesus grew, and when it came time for Him to begin His public ministry, we are reintroduced to a singularly important prophet whose task it was to herald Jesus' arrival and to prepare the way of the Lord, and his name was John the Baptist. John himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

The prologue to John's Gospel puts it this way: "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world." The Bible also tells us that "[Jesus] was in the world, and the world came into being through him…yet the world did not know him." And isn't that interesting? This light that serves, heals, and has the power to enable people to become children of God—how is it that anyone would not recognize and celebrate that light? Why would anyone need to ask, in a manner of speaking, "What child is this?"

And yet that is essentially the question that is posed in this morning's lectionary reading from the New Testament. It's asked by none other than John the Baptist, the one who even in utero knew something of Jesus' glory, leaping for joy in his mother Elizabeth's womb when Mary, the mother of Jesus, came to visit her. This is the same John who would declare when he was an adult: "I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This is the same John who would later say, "[Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease." This is the same John who, when Jesus came to be baptized by him in Bethany beyond the Jordan, was given knowledge and inspiration enough to proclaim the truth about Jesus: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

Ah, but a little time has passed between Jesus' baptism and the story we read about this morning in Matthew chapter 11. John is no longer in the wilderness; he is in prison. Perhaps John didn't anticipate the shame that would accompany his life and ministry. Maybe he didn't see coming the particular ways that Jesus would reign in power and glory. What he does see, though, and what he knows uniquely and personally, is that there is still a great deal of pain and suffering in the world. Lest we forget, John was a prophet, but he was also human, which means that John wasn't going to fully comprehend everything that God told him to say.

For proof of this, we need only look back to Jesus' baptism. John didn't say, "Jesus, I understand that as our Redeemer you are submitting yourself to all of God's commands just as we should do!" No! If the truth be known, it doesn't seem that John understood at all what Jesus was doing. John's ritual in the wilderness had to do with cleansing, but Jesus was without sin, and John knew it. Jesus was blameless; He didn't need to be cleansed.

The Bible tells us that "John would have prevented [Jesus], saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.'" I love this story for many reasons, not least of which is the hope and assurance it offers to ordinary people like you and me. Consider that John the Baptist, one of the most famous servants of God, wrestled with doubts and fears; yet, Jesus, even after this episode, calls John the greatest of all prophets. "Among those born of women," Jesus said, "no one is greater than John."

I'm grateful that the Bible never shields us from those very human moments in the lives of God's people; instead, it reveals them—failings, questions, struggles, and all. That honesty is one of the many reasons we can trust the witness of the Bible, because it tells the real story of real people and the gracious God who works through them. To be certain, life on this side of heaven never comes with complete knowledge, and

sometimes we too balk at Jesus' requests, His commandments, and His ordinances. What's more, and this is painfully obvious, we can see only what we can see, and that often blinds us to seeing God's work in the world.

Stuck in Herod's dark and damp and lonely prison, John asks a heartbreaking yet hopeful question, one that strikes at the heart of our human experience: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" John had preached righteousness and justice, and he had even confronted a king, but now he found himself in chains and maybe wondered: "If Jesus really is the Messiah, why does evil still seem so strong? Why am I imprisoned for doing the right thing? Is the kingdom arriving?"

Maybe we've asked a variation of John's question in our own life: "Lord, if You really are who You say You are, then why is this happening? Why did those students die at Brown University? Or why did those people die on Bondi Beach in Australia, or those soldiers at the hands of ISIS in Syria? Or maybe the questions hit closer to home: Why is it so hard to start a family? Why can't my loved one beat their addiction? Why is my relationship broken?"

"God, if there really is light in the darkness, help me, because I just can't see it! Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" Matthew 11 preserves Jesus' response, and we notice that Jesus doesn't give John a comprehensive lecture on theology. He doesn't quote the prophets or explain the mysteries of God's kingdom in a grand or granular way. No! He basically tells John, in one sense, to think back and remember what Isaiah had said about the Messiah. Those words from Isaiah 61, which Julie read for us this morning, served as the backdrop for Jesus' first sermon. They testified to the Spirit of God being upon God's promised Messiah and about how He would bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.

After Jesus read those same words in His home synagogue in Nazareth, He rolled up the scroll and sat down to preach the sermon, but He didn't say much. In fact, for those who value brevity, they would have loved His sermon. All He said was that Isaiah 61 was fulfilled in their midst. And here in Matthew 11, Jesus is effectively saying the same thing: "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." To put it plainly: "Go and tell John that the Scriptures are being fulfilled!"

That blessed Biblical portrait of the Messiah, prophesied from the days of old, is not a picture of what is to come; it is the living landscape of God's redemptive handiwork, happening right here and right now. And then, if we are not careful we miss it, as if to give us a new beatitude, Jesus adds what is to be for us a most defining mark of God's people: "And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." Consider where John was. He was in prison, and yet Jesus chose to say in that moment that we are blessed if we take no offense at Jesus.

Which I take to mean that in our lives of faith, all we really need to know is what we have already seen and heard. And what we have seen and heard is that God is forever about the business of loving us and lifting us up. John would eventually leave that prison, but he would do so on a platter. Yet John never took offense at Jesus. John never ceased to praise God. Maybe that's part of the reason Jesus calls John the greatest of all the prophets. John knew that, at the end of the day, God is faithful. John knew and believed, even in the shadows of that prison cell, that "the light of God shines in the darkness."

This is one of the richest blessings of this season we call Advent: the God of heaven and earth has stooped low and used His power in service to the powerless. That power of God in Christ continues to bend down, stooping to the weak, the captive, stooping even to our questions and doubts. One of the songs that Dr. Rogers has taught our students over the years is by Rend Collective, entitled *My Lighthouse*. The song uses

the metaphor of a lighthouse to represent God as a steadfast source of guidance and peace amidst the storms of life. Whether it is doubts, failures, silence, fear, or troubled seas, God promises to lead His children safely to shore.

The story of the keeper of the lighthouse, which I shared at the beginning of the sermon, shows how each day, with increasingly tired hands and aging lungs, he climbed those winding stairs and lit a flame that guided others to safety. That man couldn't change the fact that it was night, and he certainly couldn't calm the storm, but his light could pierce the fog. During Advent, we praise the One who pierces a deeper fog—the fog of sin, fear, and uncertainty. Jesus is the true light that sees farther than we could ever hope to see. And what God sees is the vulnerable: the widow, the prisoner, the brokenhearted prophet in a prison cell. He sees you and me.

If Jesus' kingdom is not only about seeing us, but actually meeting us in our need, and if Jesus' love is about bending low, then what should that tell us about our love? Friends, it should tell us, among other things, that Advent is not a season of nostalgia. It is so much more than Christmas cards. It's more than charity. Advent is about covenantal faithfulness. It is about Jesus being the Messiah that He was called to be, and it is about us being the children of God that we are called to be.

In so many ways, Advent invites us to serve others by seeing farther than they can see—farther than fear, farther than cynicism, farther than our circumstances, whatever they may be. Advent implores us to be about the task of lifting our eyes, seeing who God is, observing what God is doing, and seeing who God is lifting. In this way, Advent gives us courage to keep leaning forward, to keep lighting that proverbial lamp, and to keep trusting that God is for us and never against us.

The same God who saw John in that prison sees us in whatever prison is ours. Know this: God's power bent low in love—the very light of Christ—can help us navigate life's fiercest storms, and it will always lead us weary sinners home.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.