



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“GOD CAN’T BE PHOTOSHOPPED”

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 139; Acts 17:16-34

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, May 19, 2019
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Acts 17:16-34

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, ‘What does this babblers want to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.’ (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.’ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.”

Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.’

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’ At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

So I have this habit of wearing a pen in my shirt – right up, near my top button. It is not the coolest thing, I know -- but it is practical – I always know where my pen is. Last weekend, my wife Martha Ann and I were out celebrating Mother’s Day at a local restaurant. After dinner we went outside and asked someone to take our picture. After our volunteer photographer had walked away and was no longer within earshot, I heard Martha Ann say, “Lanneau Holton Siegling, Jr., your pen is right in the middle of the photograph.” And sure enough, it was, and I apologized. Martha Ann went into her iPhone’s settings and began to edit the picture. Her goal was to Photoshop out the pen – which is to, as most of you know, a way of manipulating the image in such a way that the pen is removed. In fact, when this is done well, you’ll never know that the pen had been there in the first place. Of course, as fate would have it, we didn’t have the right kind of software – the right kind of app. So Martha Ann ended up having to crop the picture.

If the truth be known, Photoshopping is not at all relegated to smart phones or cameras. We do it in our life all the time – hiding from the picture of who we are those things about us that we don’t want others to see; those less than desirable aspects of our life - those embarrassing moments, our worst choices - we don’t want people to see those things...and so we work hard to prevent them from showing up in our photo. We cut other things out as well - that relative who gets so political around the Thanksgiving table – we don’t just dismiss them, we no longer invite them so that, as far as the picture of our life is concerned, it is as if those people and those situations, whatever they may be, do not even exist.

Sadly, some people mistakenly presume that they can do the same thing with God. In fact, so willfully determined are they to avoid God’s presence and influence in their life, they stop at absolutely nothing in their efforts to remove God from the equation. And when it proves quite impossible to Photoshop God out – and when they realize that God cannot be erased -- some people will try a different location, thinking that a changed scenery will do the trick and so they go to the farthest limits of the sea, or maybe they make their bed in Sheol...they try to get as far away from God as they possibly can!

But God always without fail, always shows up in the picture, because that’s the nature of God. Call it ever-present...call it omnipresent...simply put, God is inescapable! To be certain, whether we find ourselves running away from God like the prophet Jonah -- catching a ship bound for Tarshish and ending up in the belly of a whale; or perhaps we find ourselves no less lonely or alienated just walking the city streets of Charleston. Indeed, whatever shadows seem to linger in our portrait, nothing can ultimately separate us from God’s love. It is always going to be there.

And that’s so important for us to remember and to affirm because sometimes it is very difficult to see the presence of God in our midst. Maybe we are just in a bad place – maybe we find ourselves in financial stress, or experiencing stress within a relationship. Maybe we’ve lost

someone we love and find ourselves grappling with matters of faith. Maybe as a friend here in our church recently said, their body was aging according to schedule. Our bodies just don't do what we want them to do. At times like these we're prone to ask: "Where is God in my life?" Are you still with me, God? Am I still with you?

Someone I know and care about deeply still feels to this day that at a particular time in their life, God completely abandoned them. They earnestly prayed to God and they asked for God's help...but when it didn't come in the way that they had expected, they became hurt and angry and disillusioned.

That experience mirrors that of so many of the voices we hear in the Scriptures – voices like the Prophet Isaiah who said about God: "You have hidden your face from us," or the Psalmist who declared: "We are given no signs from God; no prophets are left, and none of us knows how long this will be."

The truth is, any number of the saints of God have felt this way at one time or another. Take C.S. Lewis, for example, during one of the most painful times of his life he wrote the following: "A door slammed in my face, and a sound bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence..." And so it happens that even the most faithful among us have found themselves holding up that picture and straining and squinting, trying to catch just a glimpse of God. Just a hem of his garment will do the trick.

Ah, friends, please, please know that in those moments it is our eyes that cannot see; it is our ears that cannot hear. Mary Stephenson wrote a rather famous short story entitled, "Footprints in the Sand". It goes like this: "One night I had a dream. I dreamed I was walking along the beach with God. Across the dark sky flashed scenes from my life. For each scene, I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand, one belonging to me, and the other to God. When the last scene of my life flashed before me, I looked back at the footprints in the sand. I noticed that many times along the path of my life there was only one set of footprints. I also noticed that it happened at the lowest and saddest times in my life.

This really bothered me and I questioned God about it: "Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life there is only one set of footprints." "I don't understand why, when I needed you the most, you would leave me." God replied: "My precious child, I love you and would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

In our reading from Psalm 139 we learn that God is always with us, not only in our past – from even before we were born - times when we were being fashioned and our inward parts being made; oh, but God is also ahead of us. He is in the future – for God, we are told, knows our words before they are on our tongues.

But God is also present with us right now! And just when the picture of life seems dark and foreboding, the Bible reminds us that, "Even the darkness is not dark to [God]; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to [God]."

The sooner we come to terms with God's presence in our life and in the life of the world, the better equipped we will be to actually honor God; for knowing as we do that God is always in our picture, we can do at least one of two things: we can either point God out and draw people's attention to the ways that we experience God's mercy, and love, and joy, or we can work to make those things more obscure.

I would argue that's what Thomas Jefferson did! He created what we call today the Jeffersonian Bible, which amounted to little more than bits and pieces of Jesus' life, but only the parts that Jefferson preferred, the ones that Jefferson found helpful. The end result was that while God could still be seen in Jefferson's life, his was a picture that had been distorted, and it proved exponentially harder for people to understand the truth about God when that's all they had to go on.

Sadly, I suspect, we do much the same thing when we neglect the full breadth and scope of who God is, limiting our witness to only those things about God that we like – forgiveness, God seeking and saving the lost, bring it on! But repentance, a love that chastens, we might be inclined to try to Photoshop out those parts. At the end of the day, though, there should be great joy and responsibility that comes with knowing that we have the capacity, by God's grace, to help others see God more clearly...and to not only to see God in our picture, but also in theirs.

Take our New Testament Lesson, for example, the Apostle Paul arrives in Athens, and instead of tearing them down and suggesting that the portrait of their life and their life together was good for nothing, on an eternal scale, he helped them to see things more clearly. In verse 22 Paul says: "For as I went through the city and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I found among them an altar with an inscription, 'To an unknown God.'"

Paul goes on to talk about the one who made the world; the one who is the Lord of heaven and earth; the one who gives to all mortals life and breath and all things; the one who allotted the times of their existence.

And we have no way of going back and seeing the expressions on their faces, but my guess is that the philosophers of that day – they were hanging on Paul's every word, because, what may be lost on us from time to time is that Paul's choice of words, his whole manner of speaking – the fact that he referenced one of their contemporary poets when he said: "For we too are his offspring" – all of this proved to be Paul's way of being heard...of earning the right to speak.

Nevertheless, Paul takes his conversation in a decidedly different direction in verse 30, for it is there that we begin to see how Paul is going to help the people of Athens to see the picture of their life in a new way, a beautiful way. In verse 30, Paul says: "While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

It is as if Paul was saying...this unknown God that you talk about, I know him! Let me tell you about him. Let me help the picture of your life to come into focus. Let me help you see more

clearly that image that you do not yet comprehend – that very life of Christ, the one whom God has raised from the dead.

I wonder how many people there are out there today for whom the picture of their life includes the very heavens that are telling the glory of God...but who do not yet see it for what it is – presuming God in their picture to be unclear, unknown. Seeing God's footprints, but mistaking them for their own.

Oh, praise be to God, that's where we come in...that's where Christ's church engages this culture. Because we, who throughout another day have spent a significant amount of time editing our life's photos, taking the picture of our life and cropping it here, adjusting the color and the shading there.

It seems as though not a day goes by when we do not also give the Almighty a little touch up via the airbrush, because that's what we do as sinners...and we are pretty good at it! But we are also redeemed, and so it is that our contributions, by God's grace, can also be a blessing. To be certain, our witness to the love of God in our life and the love of God in someone else's life can help to make the gift of God's love and the light of God's presence to be seen as if for the first time.

It is amazing how God does that – how God manages to stay so close to us all of the time, and that ours is also the responsibility of bearing witness to the nearness of God. Such are the wondrous workings of our heavenly Father; for indeed, it is a knowledge that is too wonderful for us, it is so high that we cannot attain it...oh, but it is there...closer than our hands, than our feet, than the very breath in our lungs.

Oh, no matter where we are,
no matter where we go,
just because we may not be able to see God or fully comprehend how God is active and at work in the world and even through our life's witness,
don't ever presume that God is not there!
Don't ever doubt that God is not with you!

As the Psalmist declared: "How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them – they are more than the sand; I come to the end – I am still with you."

Let us pray...

Lord, we are always with you, because you are always with us. Help us to rest in the knowledge 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." Amen.

**The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.*