



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE GOD WHO SEES”

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 121; Acts 3:1-10

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, January 24, 2021
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Acts 3:1-10

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, 'Look at us.' And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, 'I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.' And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. All the people saw him walking and praising God, and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

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 our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

This morning we affirm that the God of all creation is very much active and at work in the world, for as the Psalm attests, "He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." Those words testify to the God who searches us and knows us...knows us from before we were born...knows even our thoughts even before they are on our tongue. Indeed, this is the God who loves us so much that he sent His Son so that whoever believes in Him, will not perish but have everlasting life.

Such is the blessed reality that we have come to know as the people of God; yet, if we are being honest with ourselves, we can also admit that this reality of an ever-present God, being searched and known, it can be a little bit unnerving. The conviction that, for God, no need of ours is unknown and from whom no secret is hidden – the belief that God sees everything...it erodes our sense of privacy and independence, that presence of autonomy with which we so often seek to live our lives.

I suspect that many times we'd just assume be left alone...we don't want to be seen, do we? After all, we know full well what we have done and what we've left undone. I wonder, is it the fact that God sees – is that what sometimes gives us trouble, or is it what we take that to mean? And, I say that because there are some people in the world today for whom God has perceived

as threatening and foreboding, and they perceive God as something akin to that “Eye of Sauron” – if you have seen the movie or read the book, *The Lord of the Rings*, by Tolkien, then you will remember that there was this fiery all-seeing eye high atop a tower and it’s always watching people.

For others, God may be like the story that comes to us from a Christian school’s cafeteria. There was a pile of apples on a table accompanied by a note from the kitchen staff which read: “Take only one. God is watching.” And at the other end of the table, there is a pile of cookies, and accompanying that display was a hastily written note by one of the students, and it says: “Take as many as you want! God is watching the apples.”

Still, for some, God is like that age-old joke wherein a robber enters a house and hears somebody repeating the phrase: “I see you and Jesus sees you.” And if you have heard the joke before, then I’ll get right to the point – it was a parrot who was speaking, and Jesus happens to be a guard dog.

Sadly, that is how many people perceive God...as some eye in heaven...looking down...waiting for us to slip up...watching, as if to catch us in the act. I can’t help but to think that that must be how the servant in the Parable of the Talents felt. The Master, who is God, goes on a journey, but before he leaves, he gives each of his servants a measurement -- a weight...it could have been silver or gold...we don’t know exactly, but it is clear from the parable that even one talent is of significant value.

Two of the servants, they take their capital, and they invest it – and they make more, they doubled their talents. But to the one who was given one talent...do you remember what he did? He took his one talent and he buried it in the ground. And why? Because he was afraid of the master. When the master returned from his journey, the one who had been given one talent says this, “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so, I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, have what is yours.”

Now, what’s especially interesting about that parable to me is that the man who buried his talent -- he had such a skewed perception of God, because nothing about the way the Master had dealt with him up to that point in the parable suggested that God had been anything but generous...counting him as one of his servants...trusting him with something of great value. I dare say, at times, we are probably a lot more like that servant than we may care to realize. We have this image of a harsh God, a demanding God...a God who takes and takes and takes; when, in actuality, what we see in the Bible is a God who gives and gives and gives!

And that is not to say that God does not see the evil in our hearts. Proverbs 15:3 says as much: “The eyes of the Lord are in every place beholding the evil and the good.” But here’s the thing: When God encounters evil in the scriptures, and take for example the Ninevites, which, we are told, their wickedness had not escaped God’s attention, God sends the prophet Jonah to tell them to repent. Likewise, when Jesus could see – even when they weren’t saying anything – when He could see what the Pharisees were thinking in the silence of their hearts...he goes on to tell them about God – that he was and is God!

The point I am trying to make is that God continually has an eye toward our redemption; God sees to our welfare, ultimately to do us good and not harm. Consider just a few of the many Biblical references to this one True God who sees. While talking to Moses, God says, “I have observed the misery of my people.” In other words, God had seen it; God was watching intently, and, ultimately, God led our ancestors out of bondage.

Just last week, one of the Sunday school videos which Suzy coordinates for our youngest children each week, it was about God’s call of the Prophet Samuel. Now, much later in Samuel’s life, he will be called upon to anoint a King for Israel, King Saul, and you could literally translate what he says there as this: “I have seen me a King.” Now that King, King Saul, he would one day fall woefully short of God’s expectations, and God would seek to anoint another King, King David...and at that time when David’s brothers all appeared to be far more kingly than David did, listen to what God says about those brothers, those other sons of Jesse. The Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” This is the nature of the God who sees. God sees the potential in us...the future in us...even when we may not see it ourselves.

It should not be lost on us that in other Biblical call stories, it is always God who sees us first. It’s always God who takes the initiative – and whether God calls us from the shores of Galilee and from the task of mending our nets, or if God calls us from the couch in the family room, indeed, whether it is at the beginning of our journey or maybe we have come to our senses and we’re returning to God like the prodigal son, and still even when we are off at a great distance...God sees us!

We will recall from last week’s New Testament Lesson that this phenomenon is what truly astonished the disciple Nathaniel – that God had seen him under a fig tree before Philip had come to him. But then Jesus did something remarkable, didn’t he? He began to tell Nathaniel that he was going to see even greater things. Of course, Jesus was referring to himself – expressing that he was the actual incarnation of Jacob’s Ladder, that he is the one who allows God’s glory to come to us and which also provides us access to God in heaven.

Fast forward a little bit to another episode with some of those same disciples, with Nathaniel, Philip, others. “And you know the way to the place where I am going,” Jesus says. Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know the Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” In saying this, Jesus makes it abundantly clear that when we behold the Son, we behold the Father. And it begs the question: what have we seen about God in the person and work of His Son?”

Well, there is so much that we have seen, but for the sake of time, let us consider that same occasion when John the baptizer sent his disciples to Jesus, and they ask him a very important question: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” they ask. Listen to how Jesus responded: “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.”

Those are the things that Jesus knew could be readily seen about his life, and so it happens that through such blessed actions, we begin to see the very heart and mind of Christ, and if we are called to have the heart and mind of Christ ourselves – which we are – then are not those the kinds of things that people should see when they look at us? We’ll come back to that in just a moment.

In our New Testament Lesson this morning, when Peter approached the Beautiful Gate – that ornate gate made with gold and silver, there was a man sitting outside. He was a man, we are told, who had been lame from birth, and because it was the custom for people to give to the needs of the poor, he was stationed right out front...that was a really good place to ask for alms. But what a sad sight that must have been...what a fixture in that place this man had to be...carried on his mat, day after day, positioned there by the Beautiful Gate, not to worship...but to beg.

What would we have done? I mean, it is so easy to look away, isn’t it? It is so easy to avert our eyes and choose to ignore the plight of others; but Peter, he stopped...and, more than that, the Bible tells us that, “Peter looked intently at him.” It’s as if Peter were saying, “I see you! Everyone else may be going about their business...rushing in and out of the temple...not wanting to get involved...forgetting that you are even here, but I see you!”

Friends, if you don’t hear anything else this morning, hear this: The Lord our God wants us to know that He sees us! God wants us to know that He is well aware what’s going on in our lives. God didn’t wake up this morning and read “Heaven’s Post and Courier” and say, “This COVID thing, I keep reading about that.” And be it the riots in Washington, DC, or Seattle, Washington, or anywhere in between...none of them, not a one, escapes the attention of God.

God knows the things that make us anxious. God knows when we feel worried or alone or isolated, and in all these things God has promised to be for us a very present help. And what’s more, and as the Psalm reminds us, God has made it his business not only to watch but to actually “keep our going out and our coming in from this time on and forevermore.” Now, that word “forevermore” ...that is a very important word for us to hear, because it reminds us that God has the long view in mind. In other words, God doesn’t only see our present circumstances; God sees what is yet to come.

We briefly took up this topic in two of our weekly Bible studies last week. We were looking at Luke chapter 6, which provides an abridged version of the Beatitudes, which we also find in Matthew chapter 5. As Luke provides a litany of blessings and woes and speaks about the future – that Kingdom of God that will one day come in its fullness – he also makes it clear there are times, and living on this side of heaven as we do, there are times when we may find ourselves poor or hungry or sorrowful. And that doesn’t mean that God has abandoned us. It certainly doesn’t mean that God is not at work in the midst of those circumstances to bring about healing and wholeness.

More to the point, Luke's Beatitudes bear witness to one of God's greatest promises: that, one day, God's Kingdom will come in its fullness, and one day the hungry, every single one of them, will be filled, and those who weep, they will laugh! Ah, but Luke doesn't just leave us with a hoped-for future; he also helps us to know how we can see that future in our life today. He tells us what it will look like... it will look like loving our enemies, praying for those who abuse us, giving to the one who has taken our coat, even our shirt...it will look like lending to those without any expectation of getting it back. In so many ways, it goes right back to the life and ministry of Jesus, that what we have seen in him, others might see in us.

The Prophet Isaiah had this to say about Jesus, "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account." That is the Jesus who we could barely see on account of the sin in our hearts; but, thanks be to God, Jesus chose to see us...to look intently at us...and to redeem us!

And to be certain, we who have received great mercy...it is incumbent upon us to show that mercy to others! Indeed, we who have been seen, we must learn to see...to see the needs of the world, to see the needs of the human heart, and to see them as God sees them. When we see the world through eyes of faith...and when we choose, like our Savior to dwell among one another...and when we seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness...God sees that – God also sees the fruits of our blessed labor...even those fruit that will ripen long after we are gone, fruit that we may never taste. So be at peace and know that God sees us and loves us and is continually at work to bring our thorny ways to a joyful end – for that is the gracious promise of the very God who has declared, "I see you."

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