



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“PROVIDENCE HAS EYES”

Scripture Lessons: Ruth 3:1-13; 2 Matthew 2:13-23

This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, November 14, 2021 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Matthew 2:13-23

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son.’

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

‘A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.’

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He will be called a Nazorean.’

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 mediations of each of our hearts, be pleasing and even joyful in your sight. For you are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A funny little story is told of a mountain climber who, at an altitude of nearly 15,000 feet, slipped and fell, and he began to slide toward the edge of the mountain. His life flashed before his eyes and he knew that he was destined to fall headlong into the cavern below, but just as he approached the edge of the cliff he was able to reach out and grab the branch of a small scraggly tree. His weight pulled the tree almost entirely out of the ground, but a few of the roots held, but even they were beginning to come lose. “Is there anybody up there who can help me?” the man yelled. Instantly, a deep and powerful voice replied from the heavens: “Yes, I am up here and I will help you. All you have to do is let go of the branch and trust me.”

The mountain climber looked down and he looked up and then he looked down again and he responded with a trembling voice, "Is there anyone else up there who can help me?" I dare say that for such a fictitious story, it sure does ring true, because in a world where people wonder if there really is anybody up there; and if there is, can they help us; and even if they could, are they all that interested in doing so? Ah, in response those questions and others like them, God's providence offers a resounding "Yes." Yes, God is present, and, yes, God can make a difference in our life, and, yes, God is very much inclined to help us.

I ran across a quote from the renowned English Baptist Preacher who lived in the mid to late 1800's Charles Spurgeon, and this is what he said: "providence has eyes." I like Spurgeon's choice of words, because when we take the word providence and break it down into its component parts, we have the prefix "pro" which means before and then there's the root word from which emerges our more modern word video. I liken it to those who are able to worship with us this morning by virtue of the video cameras. They can see what is happening as if they were right here. And so, at a very basic level, providence is about the One True God who watches and sees things before – and not just before, as in "before they happen," but before, as in God being able to see everything that is before Him. "Providence has eyes." And if God's eyes are on the sparrow, and we know that they are, then how much more are God's eyes fixed upon his children, even our little ones. Indeed, this conviction lies at the heart of the sacrament of Baptism, for in these waters, as we have already affirmed this morning, God's eyes are fixed upon little Sally Watkins. God already loves her, loves her from before she can respond in faith.

We read about another child in this morning's New Testament Lesson and things seemed dire and they were dire. King Herod had set in motion a search and destroy mission and he cast the net wide, he did not want to miss his opportunity to kill this child that had been born the King of the Jews and so he set out to kill all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or younger, according to the time he had learned from the wise men. But Jesus' father, Joseph, was warned in a dream about Herod's terrible plan, and so he escaped with the family to Egypt, and they stayed there until King Herod died, at which time God spoke to Joseph in another dream, and told him to return to Israel. Now, this is where we witness yet another integral aspect of God's providence. You see, not only is God observant to the needs of his child, not only does He see them, but God provides a contingency / provides a way when there did not seem to be any way at all. And lest we presume that God's providence is only applicable to his Son, our Savior, remember that God gave that only begotten Son, so that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life! In this way, we, each of us, we have been adopted by the grace of God. In other words, we are all God's children and the Bible makes it abundantly clear that God's providence, it extends to us as well! Now, that said, if we are to truly understand God's providence, then we will need to understand it in light of the long view. And, what I mean by this is, we live in a world of near instant gratification, we want something, we get it, we buy it, it is delivered to our front door, not so with God's providence! Like Jesus' own disciples, at times, we must sit with the unknown, the mysterious, the unanswered. We must grapple with those things which God allows to happen, and for which there seems to be no rhyme or reason.

In the OT we read about Joseph and his brothers. You will recall that Joseph was one of the 12 sons of Jacob, but he was also Jacob's favorite and this made his brothers jealous, and one day those brothers sold Joseph into slavery, and those traders sold Joseph to an officer of Pharaoh in Egypt. While serving in that house, Joseph was falsely accused of trying to assault his master's wife and so he was sent to prison. And that would seem a natural place for Joseph's story to end, but it doesn't end there. It turns out that Joseph would one day prove to be the only one in all the land who could interpret Pharaoh's dream, which results in Joseph being given a position of honor, subordinate only to Pharaoh, and he finds himself eventually put in charge of preparing Egypt for a famine that would last for seven years. Now, when that famine finally arrived, so did a great many people who were starving, including Joseph's brothers! And so, it happened that God was at work in Joseph's life after all! God had not abandoned Joseph. God had not forsaken Joseph. No! God had been continually at work in and through the circumstances of Joseph's life in order to save him, and that through him all of God's people would be saved. To be certain, it was none other than God's previous and providential work that allowed Joseph to say to his brothers, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today." The harm that is done to us, the evil we experience, the evil that we do, that does not mark the end of our story either, because God is forever about the business of redeeming life, restoring life, taking the bad and ultimately making of it something good. And while it may happen now, it may not happen for a long long time, which brings us the very important matter of being faithful in our waiting.

Joseph, when he was thrown into that pit and then sold into slavery, and when he was sitting in that prison cell of his for a couple of years, he remained faithful, and that faithfulness, it was actually a means by which God's providence was ultimately accomplished. It was the same for the Joseph in our New Testament Lesson, for the Bible tells us that he "obeyed" the angel and took the child and his mother and fled to Egypt and when the message came to him that Herod was dead, Joseph got up and went. Simply put, Joseph was faithful! Of course, this is not to say that God's providence is somehow dependent upon our actions. Make no mistake about it, God doesn't need us, but God wants us!

Consider again the story of Ruth. Now, since I have talked with you before about the literary design of the book, I won't go into great detail except to demonstrate how our faithfulness can factor into God's providence. In the beginning of the book of Ruth, we are told that the events of this story took place during the time when the judges ruled, which we know to be a time of weak faith and irresponsible conduct. The people would disobey God, God would raise up a judge, they'd reform their ways, the judge would die, and they'd fall right back into their bad patterns. We also know that the period of the judges preceded the time of Israel's Kings and so there is no King! We are introduced right away to Naomi and her husband Elimelech, who have fled from their homeland of Bethlehem, due to, of all things, a famine and so there is no food! After the move, Elimelech dies along with their two sons, but not before those sons had married Moabite women and so there is no son! Naomi eventually returns to her people and as she enters the town we hear them say, "Is this Naomi." And she says, "Don't call me Naomi, call me Mara which means bitter, for the Lord has dealt bitterly with me" and so she has essentially lost her name.

No King, no food, no son, no name and what is left is apparent emptiness: “I went away full and the Lord has brought me back empty.” That’s basically chapter 1, but by the time we get to chapter 4, we find that Naomi’s situation is very different. Where there was not name, we find that Naomi’s name has been restored and where there was no son, now Naomi is a grandmother and where there was no food, Naomi has become the child’s nurse and where there was no king, we come to find out that this child, Obed, he will become the grandfather to Israel’s greatest King, King David.

So how did this story change? How did that turnabout happen? Well, the answer is simple, “providence has eyes.” God had seen the plight of Naomi and was determined to meet her needs. And it didn’t mean that her husband was raised from the dead. It did not mean that her sons were restored to her. It didn’t mean that that previous and terrible chapter was erased. Oh, but it did mean that there was another chapter yet to write. And God was going to write it, no doubt, but just as was the case with Joseph and his brothers, as well as Joseph, the father of Jesus, Naomi’s faithfulness would be means by which God’s providence is worked out.

In Ruth chapter 3, Naomi, having noticed that her daughter-in-law Ruth and Boaz had developed more than a passing interest in one another, she resolved to plot a way out of her emptiness. It was the time of the harvest and Naomi knew that Boaz would sleep on the threshing floor with his grain and so she told Ruth to go to the threshing floor after Boaz had had his fill of food and wine and to recline next to him. This Ruth did and so when Boaz woke up from sleeping on the threshing floor on night, he found Ruth lying beside him, a Moabite peasant woman with no status whatsoever and she said to him, to a man of Israel, mind you: “You are the next of Kin. Fulfill the law of God.” Ruth was basically reminding Boaz of an ancient marriage law which called upon the “next of kin” of the deceased to marry that man’s widow so as to continue to family tree. Needless to say, Boaz faithfully responded. That’s how the story changed. It changed because of God’s providence; it changed because God never abandoned his children; but also changed because God’s children never fully abandoned God. Oh, we might think that God is not with us. We may experience life awfully close to that old African American Spiritual and “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen.” But the song doesn’t end there, does it? “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen. Nobody knows but Jesus.”

“Providence has eyes!” But more than being a casual observer, God cares for us and God loves us, and the Bible tells us that nothing can separate us from that love! Even when we cannot see him, God is there, like a potter forever working with the clay of our lives, fashioning us – ah, from the lumps of clay that we are – fashioning us for a future. But there is also within each of us the capacity to work with God, to be pliable in God’s hands, obedient to God’s design. Friends, there is somebody up there and God can and does help us, and when we are faithful, we will see God’s providence all the more clearly!

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.

