

Sermon Text for October 22, 2017

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Isaiah 9: 2-7, John 1:1-18

“A heart for salvation”

Welcome to First Presbyterian Church as we begin our Advent season. This time of year is my absolute favorite because there are so many memories that are tied up in it. The church decorated so beautifully, the Advent candles, all of it. There is a tradition, and history, and strong feelings that are all tied up in this time of year especially in this church. What we represent as a community is a single body focused on Jesus Christ. I hope what you see around you will also give you happy feet to want to share this time of year, and the presence of Christ, with those who are important to you.

Part of the tradition of Advent is to await the coming of Christ not just of Christ in a manger but the second coming of Christ. In some churches there is a mandate to stay away from Christmas carols until Christmas Eve. For the purists that makes sense. This year I decided that if you can't beat them...join them. Throughout Advent we are going to celebrate Christmas every Sunday by looking at a different Gospel story of the birth of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Be careful what you ask for. Every Sunday for the next 4 Sundays we are going to be reading from the Gospels about their take on Jesus' birth.

Today, in our birth narrative, we are going to see that God has a heart for salvation for each one of us. If you had to choose one Gospel to start with which one would you pick? That's right, John of course. For those of you new worshipping here you were spared my first two years here when we went through John when we definitively decided that John far exceeds any of the others.

John reminds us today that before you get to the manger, the cute baby born in a dark world, you have to understand the otherness of God, the power, the glory, the throne, the majesty, the exaltedness so that we can understand what it took for God to dwell in and inhabit a manger. There is some very serious preliminary work that has to take place before we skip right to the Christmas pageant.

Today, we are going to see that because God has a heart for the salvation of all people that he gave us his son, his only Son Jesus Christ. And that Son, that God came and lived with us. A heart of salvation today leads us to a very in-depth study of who this God is and who we are in relation to that God who became one of us.

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John is a very, very different Gospel and unmatched in many ways by the other Gospels. It never mentions the birth of Jesus Christ as far as the when and the where. Instead, the first 18 verses give us another name for Jesus, it is The Word. In Greek you may have heard it before, LOGOS. Look at chapter 1 again of John and let's substitute the word LOGOS for the word Jesus, God is called the Word. This account in John isn't just about the birth of Jesus Christ but it gives us the entire history of salvation.

It is not just a story about God and God's presence but primarily a portrayal of divine communication. God is called the Word because God is constantly in contact with us, in relationship with his creation. John doesn't just start at the beginning of baby Jesus' life, but at the very beginning when the Son was creating at the right hand of the Father. We begin when the alpha and the omega had already taken their place.

If we go back to Genesis we can see why John begins the way that he does. The beginning of Christmas is not found in a manger but in the creator. God spoke, the Word came forth and things started to happen. Do you see the parallel? I'm sorry, but this is exciting to me. I love this. There is no beginning and end. God was and is and always shall be.

What this is the beginning of is the people of God. Look at vs. 11, we are going to skip around a bit today, 18 verses is a lot of ground to cover, we see this is our history of redemption. The Word came to his people and they did not receive him. Remember the words of Isaiah 53:3 – this was Jesus. But God did not give up, vs. 12, to all who received him and believed in him they became children of God. This is our salvation history. God has a heart for salvation, not damnation. We are people born not of passion and desire, but of the compassion of God found in the Logos, Jesus Christ.

In Isaiah 9 we hear of this celebration not just because God has acted and moved and brought about victory, but rather God has acted what is called pro-nobis, for us, God

has claimed victory for us. This child that is so famously sung about in Handel's Messiah was born unto us, for us and for our sake.

The heart of God for each of us is seen in John and also in Hebrews 1:1-4 where from the beginning of time God has had a heart for our salvation. God hasn't called you just recently, he has always sought you out. Maybe it is only now that you have been able to hear him.

The central verses in John 1 that speak not only of God's endless attempt to bring salvation to all of humanity also speaks to the central miracle that is found in Christmas. From the virgin birth, to the life, death, and resurrection, Jesus came upon the earth for us, but as one of us. We have to see what lies behind the manger before we can look at the baby in it. This should absolutely floor you.

God became one of us. The Bible uses a much more descriptive term called flesh. In the flesh. Verse 14 states that the Word, the Logos, the power of God became flesh. John begins his Gospel with the declaration of God becoming flesh and ends it much more descriptively as such. Remember doubting Thomas? I will not believe. Jesus shows up with his flesh torn on his side and his hands and feet mangled. Stick your finger in my flesh and believe. Thomas' response, the only time in all of Scripture that we hear this confession: My Lord and my God.

We find this in all of Scripture, this understanding of God coming in the flesh. Romans 1:3, then again Romans 8:3. That little baby in the manger is so much more than cute and cuddly and quaint. Jesus Christ is God in the flesh who, as this verse states, dwelt among us. Not only is it crucial to see the physical nature of Christ, but the fact that God decided to dwell among us.

This term literally means to pitch a tent. In Exodus 25:8-9 God demands that the Israelites as they are walking through the wilderness pitch a tent, a tabernacle to make sure that they knew he was present. But here the term among us is literally in us. When Jesus Christ came his heart is so directed to our salvation that he didn't just dwell in our midst, but literally in us, in our hearts.

Look at Revelation 21:3. This is what we have to look forward to in Christ's coming back again. He will live in us and dwell in us and we will be his people. But the message of John is not one of looking back to the birth of Christ to provide us with a

sense of security and comfort for this season. It is not the message of Revelation to provide us with a certain salvation and presence of God that is unmistakable.

But the salvation in John is present tense. Jesus Christ has chosen his people and he dwells with them now. Isaiah speaks of the child that has been born, of the victory that has been won. John speaks of the Word made flesh and the people created and now living claiming light and life and hope. This is what we find in John today that salvation is at hand and it is here, now.

What marks this salvation and how do we live so that we don't just gaze upon the baby and leave unchanged? How often we are moved by the season, and not by the reason, how often we brush by the trappings and are not really transformed by the Word trying to communicate to us and reach out to you.

Isaiah tells us his reign will be marked by peace. Salvation instills upon God's people, peace. Are you at peace in every single aspect of your life? It is possible. I am not saying are you perfect, but are you at peace even in those areas where you continue to struggle? When we pray in silence for our prayers of confession many people say they do not know what to say, cannot think of a sin. Think of those areas in your life where you are not at peace. Surely we have those areas of our life. Trace back that restlessness to what it is that brings you anxiety, or lack of peace and more often than not you will find and identify a sin that you are involved in.

The salvation that Jesus Christ provides and wants us to seek after provides peace and assurance, now. If this season you don't have that peace, then offer up that fear, loneliness, anxiety, anger, whatever it may be, up to God. John uses the term light and darkness to contrast what Christ offers and what we refuse, sometimes willfully, to let go of. Many of us face darkness this Advent season. It may be the first year without a loved one, it may be the darkness of a broken relationship, of loneliness, of financial obligations that you know you aren't going to be able to meet this year. John knew what he was talking about. He was talking about us.

But hear the Good news of the Gospel. Arise, your light has come. Jesus Christ is the light upon whom you put all of your darkness, your sin, your weariness, your anxieties for we are promised that today, right now, God will take them from you. Let go

of the load that you are carrying into this season and approach it with freedom, new-found freedom in Jesus Christ.

Gaze at the Christ child and join him in a relationship that will never be broken and will leave your heart intact and full of the love of God. Amen.