

**"Servants' Mission: Given as a Light to the Nations"**

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, GA

Season of Eastertide, Sunday, April 8, 2018

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**Isaiah 49: 1-7**

Listen to me, O coast

lands,

pay attention, you peoples from far away!

The Lord called me before I was born,

while I was in my mother's womb he named me.

<sup>2</sup> He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me;

he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away.

<sup>3</sup> And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

<sup>4</sup> But I said, "I have labored in vain,

I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;

yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God."

<sup>5</sup> And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant,

to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him,

for I am honored in the sight of the Lord,

and my God has become my strength—

<sup>6</sup> [God] says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant

to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel;

I will give you as a light to the nations,

that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

<sup>7</sup> Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,

to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers,

"Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves,

because of the Lord, who is faithful,

the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

Sermon

We give thanks that you and our surrounding congregations

in this vibrant, significant city

practice what is best called radical hospitality.

Folks from all walks of life are made at home here in the House of the Lord;

and when Decatur's Christians go out of our lovely houses of worship,

we meet & engage people wherever they are.

That is radical hospitality.

Surely grace is spoken here, there, and everywhere.

Recently I got to visiting with a member of a neighboring church.

She asked what I was going to speak on today.

I told her we are about to have a dialogue on Original Sin and Original Blessing  
and Atonement

"Original Sin?" she said. "Won't you be nervous?"

"Why should I be nervous?"

"Well, some people get nervous when they speak on a subject in front of experts."

Will you pray with me?

*"Spirit and Guide of Our Souls, add a blessing upon this Word. May this message connect with these your people. May all I do and say be blessed and a blessing, for You, O Lord, are our strength and our redeemer. In Your name we pray. Amen."*

***Isaiah said, "The Lord called me before I was born,  
while I was in my mother's womb God named me."***

It's enough to ask the question:

If we are born into the world as gifts,  
were we given to the world as Original Blessings?

I used to believe in Original Sin.

Then I discerned the Garden of Eden in Genesis is a series of faith-based stories  
about Original Blessings,

that we are made good, in the image of God,  
made in love and given in love to the world.

This was the sacred teaching of temples and churches for centuries.  
Centuries.

Augustine of Hippo flipped this narrative of faith on its ear.

Around 400 AD, Augustine invented a theology of Original Sin,  
professed that sex is sinful, that humans are sinners at birth,  
that we are doomed to everlasting death and banishment  
unless we are saved by the Living Christ,

whose death saved us from our sinful nature and natures.

Prior to Augustine, the Church taught Original Blessings.

However, Augustine's take on Original Sin has spiraled across the ages.

Christianity has been teaching some version of Original Sin for some 1,700 years.

It's enough to ask the question:

Can we unteach, unlearn, undo unhealthy theology  
& claim a fresh, holistic, organic perspective on grace and goodness and God?

We might get bent out of shape, uncomfortable, duck and run for cover.

I did; you may, as well.

That's okay.

I trust the Potter has the power to work powerful magic,  
to reshape and restore our malleable hearts & minds.

If I ever had any doubts about the joys of acknowledging

that we are born beautiful and whole and blessed gifts of God,

then those qualms faded away when confirmation arrived last

month

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My mother, Buffy Stuart Calvert, Esq., 87 years young,

received a copy of a sermon I delivered during Lent on Psalm 51.

She fired back an email.

Now, as you know, in Psalm 51 the Psalmist writes:

*"Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me."*

Buffy responded, writing in all caps:

"[BY THE WAY] YOU WERE CONCEIVED IN LOVE NOT SIN  
AND WERE ABSOLUTELY PERFECT WHEN YOU WERE BORN.

Tell that to Psalm 51, one of my favorite [psalms] except for that line.

Love, Mother"

My friends, you were conceived in love.  
You were absolutely perfect when you were born.  
We are birthed into the world as gifts of God,  
given to creation as Original Blessings.

It's enough to ask the question:

If we are born good, made in the image of God, *Imago Dei*,  
does it then follow that when--not if--when we die  
and go forth into the great beyond,  
we're delivered by the Creator as a gift to the ages?

Are we Original Blessings who become Eternal Blessings?  
What do you think, or feel, or believe, or wonder?

Recently my adult daughter in Kentucky sent me a text, saying,  
"Dad, I have an Easter sermon title for you: 'Jesus Is Dead...Just Kidding!'"

The Good News is that death does not have the last word.  
Thanks to the grace of God,  
our last breath on earth is followed by our first breath in heaven.  
Our very presence and prayers bear witness to God's gift of Life Eternal.  
Your mother who passed away *lives again*.  
Your father who died *lives again*.  
Your son, your daughter, your sister, your brother  
whose burial you witnessed *lives again*.  
Your beloved kinfolks, your friends, your neighbors near and far,  
and the great cloud of witnesses who have gone on before us *live again*.

It's enough to ask the question:

if God's grace is true, then will all people be saved?  
God's love is so good, so big, so gracious, so unconditional, so all-inclusive,  
so beyond my comprehension yet never beyond my experience,  
there must be room and welcome and radical hospitality  
in God's Heavenly abode and open arms for all.

My dictionary says that all means all.  
The Good News is that a way is made for one and all.  
In the presence of God, original blessings like you and me are restored.  
Our brokenness is mended.  
Our cracks are sealed.  
Our confessed sins are forgiven.  
Our souls are restored.  
We whose Dark is as real as the Light are shone the way.  
We who have been diseased or dis-eased, disoriented or disconnected,  
are made whole, forgiven, healed, redeemed, resurrected, restored.

I shared aloud this faith statement of a spiritual truth  
that has been percolating and bubbling up and overflowing  
in my heart and mind and soul.

A beloved friend heard my testimonial  
and asked another friend a question about it,  
who then shared it with me.

[*Let's be honest: this is how we Christians communicate.*]

*We know where Church Board meetings are decided: in the parking lot.]*

It's enough to ask my friend's question:

If everyone gets to heaven,  
and we were told only good people get to heaven,  
what is the point of being good?

I join you in returning to the Word:

***The Lord said, "I will give you as a light to the nations,  
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."***

In between our birth and death—

in the dash that defines our time on earth between our birth and death,  
our life and life everlasting—

God gives us as a light to the nations.

The point of being good is not to get a star on our heavenly crown;  
the point is to embody the love of God in Christ.

What if the purpose of Jesus Christ's death on the Cross  
was to influence humankind toward moral improvement,  
to be good in the human context, to be a light to the nations?

What if Christ's death on the cross shows the intense love of God for creation?

What if God's purpose is to move, stir, empower people into action.

Sharon Baker ponders on this, and says,

"God sent Jesus to demonstrate God's love  
and to give us an example of how we should live.  
Jesus served as a perfect example by fully revealing God's love to us.  
By dying on the cross,  
Jesus demonstrated the extravagance of divine grace  
and the lengths to which God will go...to redeem us..." [\[1\]](#)

It is enough to ask the question:

Should we do and be good because God made us good, *Imago De?*

What do you think? Feel? Believe? Wonder?

Should we embody goodness because Jesus Christ Himself  
sends us to the nations to be the light that saves and redeems?

Should we focus on following the God of Love  
so we can rest in peace, assured, secure, trusting  
that the Holy Spirit will bring us home, home for good?

What kind of light to the nations would you become  
if you invested 10% less energy  
on worrying about who is in and who is out,  
who is going to heaven or going down there,  
on whether you are really assured of a place inside the Pearly Gates?

What kind of light to the nations would you be  
if you invest 10% more energy on following God?

It is enough to live our questions out loud.

Methodist pastor Will Wilimon was the visiting speaker  
at a Lenten Sermon Series in Memphis.

He spoke at an Episcopal Church in the downtown area.

Afterward everyone was invited to stay and visit in the fellowship hall,

where soup and sandwiches were being served.  
Wilimon and the priest of the Episcopal congregation  
went downstairs to the fellowship hall.  
They watched people coming in from other areas in the church building.  
A wide range of programs and ministries were going on.  
Some people were active in giving food and clothing to families in need;  
some just finished an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting;  
some came in off the street to visit and eat with their friends.  
Everyone sat at tables and ate their soup and sandwiches in community.  
Wilimon took this all in as he looked around.  
He turned to the priest.  
*"This is a good idea you have here."*  
*"Oh, no,"* replied the priest, *"this isn't my idea. This is Jesus' idea."*

The Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit  
give us as a light to the nations,  
that God's salvation  
may reach from our doorstep  
to the ends of the earth.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen*

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[ii Sharon L. Baker, \*Executing God: Rethinking Everything You've Been Taught about Salvation and the Cross\*, Page 60.](#)

"We sinned and separated ourselves from God's love. Because of sin, we lost sight of how to live according to God's will. But God sent Jesus to demonstrate God's love and to give us an example of how we should live. Jesus served as a perfect example by fully revealing God's love to us. By dying on the cross, Jesus demonstrated the extravagance of divine grace and the lengths to which God will go...to redeem us... When we look upon the cross of Christ and see God's incredible love for us, we desire union with that love. Our desire acts as an invitation to the Holy Spirit who then infuses us, fills us, and empowers us. Through the Holy Spirit, God pours the divine love into our hearts (Romans 5:5) and by doing so, justifies us and saves us by forgiving our sin. Because of the power of God's Spirit, we then live our redeemed lives in imitation of God's love as revealed in Jesus."