

“What’s Up with the Atonement? (God Has Gotten to Us)”

Sermon for Citywide Holy Week Services

12 Noon, Monday, April 15, 2019

Host: Decatur First United Methodist Church

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor, First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Holy Scriptures: Isaiah 42: 1-9

*Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him,
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
² He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
³ a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
⁴ He will not fail or be discouraged
till he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his law.
⁵ Thus says God, the Lord,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread forth the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
⁶ “I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
⁷ to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.
⁸ I am the Lord, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to graven images.
⁹ Behold, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth
I tell you of them.”*

Thank you so much for your kind welcome!

What a joy it is to be here today with you!

To Pastor Dalton Rushing, Music Director John Cowden, Church Staff,
& the good people here at Decatur First UMC,

thank you for always making me, my family, and friends so welcome.

I bring greetings from the members and friends of First Christian Church of Decatur.

Folks said, "James, don't try to be witty or charming; just be yourself."

I love the fact that so many churches are represented here today. Grace abounds!

And should we ever imagine that grace is in short supply,

we know where to come for pimento cheese sandwiches,

which, thank God, are here and in abundance.

God Has Gotten to Us

*The Lord said, "I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.*

Isaiah prophesied that God is invested in us,

that God's grace is made real in the grittiness of the real world.

In contrast, how many of us, since we were knee-high to a grasshopper,
were presented with a pie-in-the-sky religion?

Who joins me in having heard at some point that the Cross of Jesus Christ
is all about God's desire to carry us away,

far away from this miserable, wicked world ,

to take us away, up to heaven,

where we revel forever in the Lord's ultimate escape plan.

However, the more we read the teachings of Jesus Christ

and study the prophets' testimonies,

and get in tune with God's atonement – "At-One-Ment" –

the clearer it becomes that salvation

--the saving, redeeming activity of God--

is not so much God's will

to snatch us up from a rotten world, a botched creation,

as it is to yoke us into God's loving activity,

to enlist us in God's cosmic restoration, fulfillment,

and grand reworking of creation in Jesus Christ, here, now. (Willimon,

adapted. P. 16)

"Some people think of the Cross of Jesus Christ

as our way to get to be with God in heaven when we die.

Surprisingly, biblically, the Gospels portray the Cross

as God's way to get heaven to earth now.

...Thanks to God's reconciling work in Christ,

[today] we can get to God because God has gotten to us.
On the cross, Jesus' sacrifice and love did something decisive
about the distance between God [and Creation,
between God and humanity,
between God and you and me.]
In the crucifixion, God had made a way to us, in love." (Willimon, adapted, P. 55)

When Jesus walked among us, teaching and healing people on the Way to the Cross,
folks did not walk away from their encounter with the holy saying,
*"At last! God has finally done something about my personal sin,
and one fine day I will get to go to heaven."*

Rather, it was as if the first folks Jesus restored
looked all the way back to Genesis and remembered that Creation is good.
They remembered that they were made good, as Original Blessings,
that they have the capacity and capability to be agents of change,
to change the trajectory of their lives and their world, as well.
In the crucifixion, God made a way for us to be forgiven and to forgive each other.
If there is no forgiveness, there is no life.
Where there is forgiveness, there is the abundance of life.

They say that a farmer named Boudreaux suspected his wife of hanky-panky
"Marie," Boudreaux whispered to her late one night,
"if I die, would you get married again?"
"Yeah, I guess," she replied.
"Would you give him my pick-up truck?"
"No, Boudreaux. I would never give him your pick-up truck," she said.
"Besides, he doesn't know how to drive a stick shift."

God's Gotten to Us

God gives us as a light to the nations.
The point of being good light
is not to get a star on our heavenly crown;
the point is to embody the love of God in Christ.
Sharon Baker ponders on this, and says,
*"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."*

Sharon L. Baker, Executing God: Rethinking Everything
You've Been Taught about Salvation and the Cross, Page 60.

God's Gotten to Us

Clearly one cannot discuss atonement, the saving activity of God's love,
without including in the conversation the prophetic call to justice and mercy,
The prophets spoke of God's will for *sedequah* and *mishpat*,
which are Hebrew words for righteousness and justice.
At the core of justice is mercy,
and the carrying out of mercy,
is the embodiment of righteousness.
The Prophets grasped that without one there could not be the other.

*Isaiah testifies that the Lord said, "I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.*

What if, 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,
to empty ourselves for the sake of Christian discipleship?
To nudge us toward being justice oriented?
Mercy oriented? Hope oriented?

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 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 simply, faithfully, joyfully following God?

Might we dare to say and claim that if God's grace is true,
God redeems all souls, welcomes us all into life everlasting,
so let's get busy being where our bodies are.

God in Christ stands with the suffering and the sinners,
with both victims and victimizers,
alleviating pain, renouncing sin, strengthening backs, increasing wisdom.

God calls for heaven to come down to earth
to save us, redeem us, restore us to wholeness, in love.

God commissions us to stand up to the principalities and powers,
to stand with the oppressed,
to take a stand for the moral arc that bends toward justice.

You know that moral arc that bends toward justice?

I've seen it, heard it, gazed in wide-eyed wonder upon it.

The moral arc of the universe that bends toward justice is made up of people,
folks just like us,

community groups daring to be bold and brave,
churches and temples and mosques taking risks

to speak for the voiceless,

listen to the unheard,

advocate for the powerless,

recognize that our liberation is tied together.

God Has Gotten to Us

Every summer I spend at least one week at church camp as a counselor.

Our campground is in Gordon, Georgia.

To get there, drive south to Macon, take a left,

and when you get to the middle of nowhere and meet Jesus, you've arrived.

Last summer, I shared a similar message, a similar keynote with middle school campers.

They went off together to process and talk about this.

Being creative, they crafted a short skit about a church's food and clothing drive.

In the skit, the young people with the collection of food and household items

reached out to young people who were hungry,

who made do by doing odd jobs and fixing things.

The food was shared in community; both the mood and munchies were good.

One of the children who had been fed asked about the church.

One soul from the church said it was fine, but the roof was leaking.

We can fix that, came the reply.

Let's go fix the roof together, they said, so they did.

Let's fix our church, together, they said, so they did.

Let's fix our community, our city, our world, together, they said...so we shall.

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