

“Signed, Sealed, Delivered”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Lent, Sunday, March 20, 2022

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Worship Theme

-
*“...we are completely victorious through the one who loved us.
For I am convinced that
neither death, nor life, nor angels,
nor powers-that-be,
nor things that are,
nor things that will be,
nor powers, nor height, nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us
from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Redeemer.” --Romans 8: 37-39*

Scriptures: Romans 8: 31-39 [\[1\]](#)

What then shall we say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? God is the one who did not spare the very Child of God, but rather for all of us, handed the Messiah over. Will not God—with Christ—also give us everything else? Who then will bring any charge against the elect of God? God is the one who justifies. Who will condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, moreover the one who was raised and who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

*“For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

No, in all these things we are completely victorious through the one who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor powers-that-be, nor things that are, nor things that will be, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Redeemer.

Signed, Sealed, Delivered (I'm Yours)

Stevland Morris, AKA, Stevie Wonder, and friends crafted this message in 1969,

releasing it in 1970.

*Like a fool, I went and stayed too long
Now, I'm wondering if your love's still strong
Ooh baby, here I am
Signed, sealed, delivered, I'm yours*

*Then that time I went and said goodbye
Now, I'm back and not ashamed to cry
Ooh baby, here I am
Signed, sealed, delivered, I'm yours ^[2]*

Stevie Wonder sings of straying and staying away,
of love found and lost and re-sought,
of being marked, stamped,
sealed with and delivered by
the affection of a beloved.

We can relate,
we who have been sealed and delivered by a great love
sing this song of our souls.

Signed, Sealed, Delivered (I'm Yours)

On Ash Wednesday, we had a lovely service.
Phil Foster preached on moving through and beyond *metanoia*,
changing and repenting and growing through God's forgiving grace.
The music and liturgy, the Bread and Cup, the people gathered here and online,
all combined with the Spirit of God to make a holy and eventful evening.

Standing at the Communion Table
before inviting the whole people of God to come forward for the Rite of Ashes,
I turned to Pastor Paul Turner and made a cross on his forehead, saying,
*"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.
Repent and believe in the Gospel.
Go forth as a blessed Child of God."*

Pastor Paul then etched a cross on my forehead, saying the same.

Vulnerable and visible,
we bore a humbling reminder of our sins
and our gratitude for the gift of forgiveness and reconciliation.

We walked around the Communion Table
and invited everyone to receive upon their foreheads the mark of the Cross
a dark mark made with the cooled ashes
of last year's burnt palm branches.

When I got home later that night,
I looked in a mirror for the first time since the service.

Startled, I saw in the mirror the visual, vivid reality that
Pastor Paul's right thumb etched a bold and striking cross of ashes,
one for the ages,
one for posterity's sake,
one for all the world to see.

I decided not to wash it off before turning in for the night,
to let the mark remain on my face and seep into my soul.

The next morning's shower,
cleansing like a daily dose of the renewing power of baptism,
removed any vestiges of the ashes.

However, over the next few days and weeks,
when I touch my forehead,
I still feel, sense, intuit the mark.

The memory of the ashy cross,
bold and striking and oh so visual to the world,
is a reminder I've been stamped.

Imprinted,

Etched.

Sealed.

Stamped by the love of God.

Stamped by the God of Love.

The Spirit of God breaking in and breaking out and breaking through to declare,
"You shall be mine, and I shall be your God."

Each time I tap my forehead and remember the mark of the Cross,
a passage from Jeremiah floats to the surface.

An inner Voice speaks.

*The days are surely coming, says the Lord,
when I will make a new covenant
with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.
...this is the covenant that I will make
with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord:
I will put my law within them,
and I will write it on their hearts;
and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.
No longer shall they teach one another,
or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me,*

*from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord;
for I will forgive their iniquity
and remember their sin no more. -- Jeremiah 31:31, 33, 34*

God writes on our hearts a new covenant:
God will be our God, and we shall be God's people.

In Spanish, to write is *Escribir*.

In Latin, to write is *Scribere*.

The Hebrew used by Jeremiah אֶקְטָבְנָה
is pronounced **'ek·tā·ben·nāh**

This is the one and only use of this word in the Bible,
so unique and powerful and particular in its meaning.

Here in Jeremiah 31:33

the Hebrew language clarifies
that God is doing more than to scribe a message.

The action described here is more significant than to simply write.

'ek·tā·ben·nāh means to superscribe,
to permanently stamp and seal onto our very souls
God's loving intent to have a covenantal relationship.

The Creator told Jeremiah to speak to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.
Tell the community of faith that
God's covenant is superscribed in them, in us, in you and you and you.

Proclaim that there is a new covenant, one grounded both in the Law and in Love,
a great Big Love that encompasses and includes one and all,
and all...means...all.

The prime tenet of God's will is etched upon us,
a permanent mark for us to know, cherish and share
that we are accepted, claimed, and justified by God's love.

Signed, Sealed, Delivered (We're God's)

The Apostle Paul picks up on this.

Paul identifies God's covenant of love,
and speaks to a community of faith that is persecuted,
one that is wrestling with why there is so much suffering in the world,
deeply concerned about the environment, discrimination, and wars.

Paul testifies that God is alive and at work in the world.

Into the realities of the human context

Paul bears witness to the redeeming, delivering grace of God in Christ.

God is the justifier, he says,

the intercessor,

the one who elects to claim you and you and you

as the Creator's own.

Paul asks, *"If God is for us, who is against us?"*

We think,

"Why, nobody! No one.

After all, God sent the Son, and that alone is all we need."^[3]

Paul asks, *"Who then will bring any charge against the elect of God?"*

We answer,

"Why, no one!

After all, God is the justifier, the Sovereign who accepts and blesses."^[4]

He asks, *"God is the one who justifies. Who will condemn?"*

We respond,

"No one!

After all, Christ Jesus died, was raised, and intercedes ^[5] in our lives,
every moment of every day,

through every hardship and challenge,

ever-present,

Emmanuel, God-With-Us in our joys and sorrows,

our suffering and triumphs."

Signed, Sealed, Delivered (We're Justified)

A church bulletin announced the congregation's Maundy Thursday service, saying,

"We will re-enact the Last Supper.

Afterward we will go into the sanctuary and strip the alter.

Together, we will leave the church bare and in silence."

Regardless of the bareness of your soul or attire, you are accepted by God.

Yes, affirms Paul, we are justified through the love of God.

Sealed with a stamp of divine approval.

Accepted as we are.

"God *accepts* us into fellowship..." ^[6]

Paul goes on to address "the desperate urgency of human suffering.

There is nothing oratorical or sentimental about suffering,

not even when it is the fruit of devotion to Christ." ^[7]

Suffering is not comparable.

Suffering is not fair, nor asked for, nor deserved.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., preached, *"Undeserved suffering is redemptive."*

No matter it's cause or source or origin, suffering is lousy.

Suffering sucks.

Pardon my language -- we are authentic here, or we are nothing.

Hold fast!

Be not afraid.

You and you and you are not alone.

The grim facts of violence, hatred, persecution or hunger,
or personally painful experiences or disease or loss
may appear to be examples
of being separated from God's deliverance.

They are, in fact, proof of God's power.

Yes.

Proof of God's power!

Our omnipresent Creator loves us so much God gives away holy power.

Power to give us endurance,

power to give us courage,

power to give us one another,

power to redeem and sustain you and you and you,

power to give us hope.

Leading up to his message on suffering,

Paul speaks for the Faith when he asks,

Is there anything at all that can

"...drive a wedge between us and the love of Christ?

Shall trouble or hardship or persecution

or drought or poverty or danger or war?" ^[8]

*"And yet – and yet – we come out on top every time
through [Christ] who set his heart on us.*

*For I am absolutely convinced that neither death nor life,
nor angels nor rulers*

nor the present nor the future

nor force nor mountain nor valley

nor anything else in the universe

shall be able to separate us

from the love of God

which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." ^[9]

Signed, Sealed, Delivered, the World is God's

We are upset, conflicted, angry and grieving
over the sudden destruction and onslaught of the innocents in the Ukraine.

This past Monday a young woman in Moscow
put her freedom and life on the line
to bring into the light unfathomable acts of violence and fratricide,
the intentional killing of one sibling by another.

Marina Ovsyannikova, an editor at Channel One,
burst on to the set of the live broadcast of the nightly news on Monday evening,
shouting: *"Stop the war. No to war."* ^[10]

An employee on Russia's state Channel One television...
[Marina Ovsyannikova] interrupted the channel's main news program
with an extraordinary protest
against Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

She...held a [hand-made] sign in Russian that read:
"Don't believe the propaganda. They're lying to you here."
She had written in English across the bottom of the posterboard:
"Russians against the war."

Wearing a necklace in the colors of the Ukrainian and Russian flags,
Ovsyannikova said in a video statement
that her father is Ukrainian, and her mother is Russian. ^[11]

*"What is happening in Ukraine is a crime and Russia is the aggressor.
The responsibility of this aggression
lies on the shoulders of only one person: Vladimir Putin."*

She urged fellow Russians to join anti-war protests
in order to bring an end to the conflict.

*"Only we have the power to stop all this madness.
Go to the protests.*

*Don't be afraid of anything.
They can't imprison us all."*

They can't imprison us all.
Prepare to pay the cost of discipleship to stop madness here, there or anywhere.
The power to be a deliverer of mercy already lies within,
superscribed in your being.

Signed, Sealed, Delivered (We Rise)

In the face of suffering and hardship, persecution and war,
living proof of the power of God,
we rise to the occasion.

We rise,
angry at injustice,
hopeful for reconciliation,
sparked to speak the truth in love to the principalities and powers.

In the face of injustice, violence, persecution and war,
it only takes a spark to start a revolution.

Pass it on.
Let the Spirit of God in Christ ignite in you and you and you a revolution,
a revolution of love,
a revolution of being a movement for wholeness
in a fragmented world.

This is who Disciples of Christ are:
we are a movement for wholeness.
Decatur Disciples are rippling love in an affirming community.

We can do and be no other because we are stamped,
superscribed, sealed with the love of God,
delivered into the city as beacons of hope,
defying logic,
confident beyond reason or our wildest dreams
stepping out on faith that nothing can separate us from such a love,
that nothing can stop us
from speaking out for peace,
working for justice,
inviting neighbors to belong.

We sense the mark of the Cross on our foreheads,
superscribed in our hearts,
a new covenant of love touching our community.

We who have been sealed and delivered by a great love
sing the song of our souls.

We who strayed or stayed away too long, we sing.

We who are intimate with the pain of suffering, we know the tune.

We who relate and reach out to our neighbors that are persecuted, we join the chorus.

We rise to sing, to bear witness with the music of our lives
to the forgiving and accepting grace of God.

*Then that time I went and said goodbye ^[12]
Now, I'm back and not ashamed to cry
...here I am
Signed, sealed, delivered, I'm yours*

*Yeah, I've done a lot of foolish things
That I really didn't mean
I could be a broken man
But here I am
Watch out with my future
Here I am,
Signed, sealed, delivered, I'm yours*

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

^[1] Translation by Wilda Gafney, from A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church, Church Publishing Inc., 2021. Pp. 82-83.

^[2] "Signed, Sealed, Delivered (I'm Yours)" Lyrics by Stevie Wonder, Lee Garrett, Syreeta Wright, Lula Mae Hardaway. 1977.

^[3] The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume X, Abingdon. Page 613.

^[4] Interpreter's Bible. Page 613.

^[5] Interpreter's Bible. Page 613.

^[6] Clarence Jordan, The Cotton Patch Version of Paul's Epistles, Association Press, 1968. Page 30.

^[7] Paul Minear and Harry B. Adams, Proclamation 2: Pentecost 2, Fortress Press, 1981. Pp 14-15.

^[8] Jordan. Page 30.

^[9] Jordan. Page 30.

^[10] 'They're lying to you': Russian TV employee interrupts news broadcast, The Guardian, March 14, 2022.

^[11] The Guardian: Ovsyannikova also released a pre-recorded video via the OVD-Info human rights group in which she expressed her shame at working for Channel One and spreading "Kremlin propaganda."

"Regrettably, for a number of years, I worked on Channel One and worked on Kremlin propaganda, I am very ashamed of this right now. Ashamed that I was allowed to tell lies from the television screen. Ashamed that I allowed the zombification of the Russian people. We were silent in 2014 when this was just beginning. We did not go out to protest when the Kremlin poisoned [opposition leader Alexei] Navalny."

"We are just silently watching this anti-human regime. And now the whole world has turned away from us and the next 10 generations won't be able to clean themselves from the shame of this fratricidal war."

^[12] Lyrics by Stevie Wonder, et al.