

Sermon: *The Promises of God's Presence and Love*

If someone were to ask you how you know, as a Christian, that God loves humanity, you would likely quote to them the words of Jesus Christ about himself that he spoke to Nicodemus. These words are found in [John 3:16](#) – “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” This is such a familiar passage that even non-Christians are often familiar with it. In fact, while I was on vacation in Arizona this summer with my husband, one hotel had a basket of beautifully-painted rocks people could take as a souvenir. They were provided by a local church. Here’s the one I took, and on the back of it, what do I find? It has a sticker with John 3:16 that allows the good news of the gospel to reach travelers, people whom those church members would likely never meet, yet here – because someone at their church chose to share their love of art on this hand-painted beauty – the love of God for all people is proclaimed.

As Christians, we cling to these words like we cling to Jesus, for they offer us *hope*. We know that no matter what we have done, no matter how many times we have strayed from him (whether this is the first time we have turned to him, the 100th or even the 1000th), we can be sure that we are loved. It does not say that he so loved the “good” ...or even humanity...but, the **world**...

For the people who first heard these words, that would have meant all of creation. To them the world was all that they could see, with the stars and the moon fixed in the heavens by God. There was earth and heaven, the total realm of God. All the sciences that I taught for so many years – none of these were born yet. All that was not understood by humanity was attributed to God or explained away as magic and sorcery. But now, **we** would believe that everything is explainable by science. In this, the *early people of God* had an advantage over us – they understood, ironically, that not everything is understandable to humans. In regard to such trust, humanity today is found to be sorely lacking. We tend to believe only in the explainable, but that is not how **faith** works. Faith takes over where *reason is lacking*.

As Christians, we put faith in God’s Word, so let us return to it now, to hear other scriptures that speak of God’s steadfast love for us, no matter what. In [Romans 5:8](#), Paul says, “*God proves his love for us in that, while we still were sinners, Christ died for us.*” As you can see, proof and reason predate science. Paul, in his letter to Rome, was giving a defense for his gospel message, for God the Father’s purpose in sending his Christ into the world. Paul points out the truth of God’s love – that Jesus Christ, God’s Messiah, chose to die for us in our sin – not just for the good, for those who strove to keep his commandments. Before we turn to God and learn to keep his laws, God is there, reaching out to us in love. God loves us even when we are turned away from his outstretched arms. Our Father longs for us to return to him so that he might embrace us with the outstretched arms of Christ and find forgiveness there, if not full understanding.

We find further support for the **promised eternal love of God**, no matter the state of our lives or our faith, in John’s first epistle, or letter. For he says in [1 John 4:9-10](#) that “*God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.*” God doesn’t love us because we love him. God loves us. Period. In this is love shown, even to the unrepentant: God chose to make us “at-one” with him through the death of Jesus Christ. **God embraced us** before we turned to be embraced. God

embraced you long before you were born, embracing you with the undying arms of Jesus Christ, God incarnate.

And in John's gospel, chapter 10 ([John 10:11,12,14,15](#)) John recounts Jesus' acceptance of the Father's purpose in sending him, saying, *"¹¹ I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them... ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep."* In the Good Shepherd passage, Jesus reveals that we can count on his love to be steadfast, no matter what we face.

Regardless of what evil attacks us in life, like a wolf intent on devouring sheep – be it greed, oppression, war, hatred, persecution, violence, sin in its multitude of forms... **Jesus stands between us and evil, refusing to leave our side.** And this is reiterated to us in [Hebrews 13:5b-6](#) which teaches that *"^{5b} he himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' ⁶ So we can say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?'"* Whatever evil the Adversary would attack with, the rod and staff of our Shepherd stand between us and that evil, so that we may find rest despite the evil intent of others.

If the 23rd psalm isn't passing through your minds already, consider it now. Christ not only leads you beside still waters, he restores your soul despite the enemies that draw near. Jesus has not only claimed Psalm 23 to be speaking of him, as our Shepherd, but in John 10:18 he revealed that **although he would lay down his life for us**, as given authority by God to do, **he has chosen to take it back up again to lead us** even now, as he sits on the right side of God in heaven. THIS is the undying, unyielding, steadfast love of our Creator, the voice who spoke and called all things into existence. This is the attribute of God testified to by Scripture – an indisputable fact about our unchanging God, who is the same, yesterday and today and forever. **God loves us enough to experience human death for our atonement** – so that we may remain at-one with him, despite the state of our faith or lack thereof.

Long before God entered the world in Jesus Christ, our Father revealed to his prepared people, the Israelites, that his love for them is never-ending, even as he revealed his foreknowledge that they would turn from him. He assured them that his love for them is as sure as the fact that they WOULD turn from him, would put other things higher than him in their hearts, and lose the many blessings he had planned for them in the land of milk and honey he was bringing them into. In [Deuteronomy 4:25-31](#) he proclaimed through Moses:

*"²⁵ When you have had children and children's children and **become complacent** in the land, if you act corruptly by making an idol in the form of anything, thus doing what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God and **provoking him to anger**, ²⁶ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that you will soon utterly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to occupy; you will not live long on it but will be utterly destroyed. ²⁷ The LORD will scatter you among the peoples; only a few of you will be left among the nations where the LORD will lead you. ²⁸ There you will serve gods made by human hands, objects of wood and stone that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell. ²⁹ From there **you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and***

soul. ³⁰ *In your distress, when all these things have happened to you in time to come, you will return to the LORD your God and heed him.* ³¹ ***Because the LORD your God is a merciful God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you; he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them.***

God makes no claim that he wouldn't get angry. Nor does he promise that no evil would befall them once they stopped following him. Rather, he testified that evil would come and pull them from their place of blessedness, so that they would lose everything, even their freedom. And yet, he promised he would be there when they finally realized their error and turned to seek him, heart and soul. I believe our stubbornness to be our poor reflection of God's steadfastness. We can stand behind our beliefs and actions, even when the ship is sinking and our heads are barely above water. Often, it is only when we hit rock bottom that we let go of our false beliefs of self-salvation, of self-certainty and self-sufficiency for whatever trials we face... Only when life has become so bleak that all hope is lost from our heads do we discover the hope that remains for us in our hearts by the power of God, because of his love. Human hard-heartedness stems from our hard-headedness, from our determination to believe more in ourselves or in *salvation through human leaders* than we do in salvation that comes solely by the hand of God.

It can be difficult for new converts to Christianity to accept that there is nothing we do to merit salvation – all has been done before our birth by God in Jesus Christ. You have no power to stop God's love, to make him quit loving you. You can ignore him, refusing to see him beckoning to you to return. You can go your own way, come hell or high-water. But the instant you decide to drop the façade of self-sufficiency, the path to return to him becomes obvious...as obvious as if you stood before the cross and saw Christ hanging there, with his arms stretched wide to either side...The intended insult and shame of being hung on a cross was turned by God into his greatest statement of love...into God's welcome to return to be embraced, forgiven, and freed.

The sight of the cross is one we can never erase from our memories. The cross has become the symbol of the greatest pain...the torture of body, mind, and soul that Christ endured...so that we might begin to know the depth of God's love. God wants us to return to relationship with him...for he remains steadfast. And so, the Father raised Christ from the dead, who returned to earth to complete God's message of love, of forgiveness, of there being no need to fear death, for our earthly death is merely the beginning of life eternal with him. But Jesus didn't stop there...as he promised before his death, God remains present with us through the Advocate, whom God sent to provide *comfort, guidance, and the ability to know truth when we hear it in his Word*. It is God's Holy Spirit who abides with us and helps us to feel God's presence, even when our eyes would say differently. In him we have blessed assurance of God's love.

Yes, **we have been promised the presence of God's Holy Spirit**, because God has sent the Spirit just as God sent Christ. It is assured. But, if we welcome God's Spirit to abide in us, to affect our actions so that we grow in our reflection of God, in our Christlikeness, then we cannot help but grow to love others as God loves us. And yet in [1 John 4:12b-16](#) we are told that *"if we love one another, then God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us."* ¹³ *By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.* ¹⁴ *And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world.* ¹⁵ *God abides in those who confess that*

Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶ So we have known and believe the love that God has for us."

In essence, this tells us that when we love one another then we are assured that God abides in us, as his love is being perfected in us. Thus, one necessarily flows from the other: God loves us, and so we are enabled to love one another...When we love one another we are assured that God abides in us, *is present with us*. Therefore, because God loves us, we will necessarily grow in acting in loving ways toward one another **if we accept his love**. Why? Because we will allow God's love to touch our heads and our hearts as well as our spirits. We will necessarily grow past our obstinance, our hard-headed and hard-heartedness, and grow toward the full-stature of Christ, for the Spirit of God abides within us, changing us from within, making this possible. So, you can rest assured that you have truly opened yourself to God's presence and God's love when you feel your very self being transformed. Accepting God's love – you will not stay who you once were. You will grow. You will feel a yearning to follow wherever God would lead you. You will put all you have and all you are at God's disposal, because you trust him implicitly to have the greatest good for everything and everyone, you included, in his sights. This is how faith leads to action. Faith is a growth process and each one of us grows at a different rate, sometimes by leaps and bounds, others by such gradual change within that it takes a while for others to notice a difference. But God's love is transformative.

This is made clear in [Ezekiel 36:25-28](#), in which God says: *"²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ I will put my spirit within you and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances."*

You were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, made clean no matter what idols have claimed your hearts before. *Your heart is made new* – by accepting God's love as revealed in his Son, your ability to love is transformed. The Spirit of God abides in you, renewing your spirit, making it possible for you to learn to follow all God's teachings about loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself. And God gives you opportunities each day of your life to live in this love. So, **ask him to show you where love is needed**, who needs your love this day, and pray for guidance in new creative ways to express this love to one another, even to the stranger in your community...for in Christ, there is no stranger. We are all made one in him.

So, I admonish you as Moses did God's people in [Deuteronomy 31:6](#). As you leave here to live according to your faith, confident of God's promised love, I say to you: *"Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified"* because of anyone who sets themselves against the love of God in Jesus Christ, *"for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you."* Let him guide you in your going out and coming in, believing in God's good purpose for you. Care for your neighbor as a beloved brother or sister in Christ, and know that God's love shines through you into their lives by the presence of his Holy Spirit. Through you, let others come to know that God remains present with them, and his love is never-ending.

*To the God of all grace, whose Spirit abides in you and transforms you,
be all power and glory forever. Amen.*