

Advent 2016  
God's Enduring Love  
1 John 3:1-3

One week from today, children all over the world will be waking to open the gifts that have been waiting for them for weeks. Parents will be excited about opening gifts as well, but they will not be nearly as excited about gift opening as they will be about watching others open their gifts. Funny how time and maturity help you understand the Savior's teaching that it is better to give than to receive. We love to give because our heavenly Father loves to give.

The best gift anyone ever received at Christmas is Jesus. You may, or may not, have success in convincing your children that this is true. That's okay! Keep saying it, anyway! Do not be discouraged over your children's attacking presents like a cat chases a mouse. You were that way, one time, too. Okay, as a parent you are required to say something, but in your heart, enjoy the show – I mean, savor the moment.

How great a gift to us is Jesus? I am not sure we can ever fully know in this life, but, if we believe, then, one day we will know! It is kind of like food. How can you fully appreciate food if you have never been hungry? Perhaps that is one benefit of fasting. At the very least, when you bless the food, resist the temptation to hurry through a rehearsed formula. Instead, take time to appreciate the feast that lies before you. It is not that the formula that is wrong, but, rather, the temptation we all face to take what we have for granted.

In the same way, how can we know the benefit of God's gift of Jesus to us unless we know what it is we miss by belonging to him? Although we do not possess anywhere close to a full knowledge of eternity and what it will mean, both for those who know Christ and for those who do not, even so, the Word tells us of the joys and the opposite that awaits us when Jesus returns or after we die. The more we contemplate and embrace the truth of Scripture, the more likely we are to know and celebrate the true meaning of Christmas and the gift that has been given to us.

This morning's sermon is designed to lead us to contemplate the inexpressible gift of Jesus, as 2 Corinthians 9:15 calls salvation in Christ, although that is not our text. In fact, it is not so much the message that is designed to fix our eyes on Jesus, but it is the text that does so – 1 John 3:1-3. Even though the verses we are about to read together do not specifically mention Jesus, there is no doubt that the gift of Jesus' incarnation, perfect life, spotless sacrifice, death, resurrection are all wrapped up in verse 1, and his Second Coming is the focus of verse 2. So, both the first and second advents of Jesus are in view in our text. It is our custom to stand when God's beautiful and holy word are being read, so I will ask you to stand. I will also ask you to read along. If you are in elementary school, I want to hear you, okay? This is good news we are reading aloud together! Read with me, 1 John 3:1-3:

1 See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. 3 And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

Three thoughts from our text, this morning, beginning with:

1. God's enduring love overcomes the horror of sin and brings us into his family

Have you ever received an honor or a gift of which you felt fully unworthy? Have you ever felt truly humbled about good things said in praise of your actions and/or your character? Maybe one of the reasons you feel so unworthy is that you know things about you that no one else knows about you. Of course, maybe you think you are, indeed, worthy of accolades coming your way, but deep down, you know that there is enough wrong with you that with only a very few differences in the way your life has gone, things could be much different and you could be the object of ridicule and scorn or of pity.

How big of a deal is it to be called a child of God? I suppose that depends on your willingness to own the depths of your depravity. I am not saying that there is a world-class criminal inside of you just waiting to get out, but Scripture tells us that all of us have missed the mark with our sin and we fall short of God's glory. Every analogy falls short of describing the distance between God and mankind – between the Creator and the rebellious and disobedient creature – but any sin against a holy and righteous God is immediate grounds for judgment on the scale of eternity. How short do we fall of God's glory? All the way, short. It is as if we tried to jump a wide canyon and whether we made it half way across the gorge or we were only one foot short of the other side, either way, we were falling to our death when God reached down and snatched us up, keeping us from hitting the ground a thousand feet below.

When John begins this portion of his letter by saying, "See," it is akin to us saying something like, "Look," or "Listen to this." John is saying, "Listen carefully, because what I am about to say is amazing, when you think about it." What demands such attention? The contemplation that we are called children of God, even with our sin and rebellion against him. It would take a bit to explain this, but in the original language, it is as if John is saying, "In what country did this originate? The world cannot make sense of a love like this!"

This is a love that is initiated by the Father. It is not that we caught God's eye and he was attracted to us. Didn't you love the gospel presentation last week when we had almost cradle to the grave participation in *Behold the Lamb*? Wouldn't you have been disappointed if we had *not* had children mishaps, like two kids falling down the steps – unharmed, of course – and others laughing or frowning inappropriately and the like? The cuteness of children is part of the attractiveness of such a performance. But, there was nothing cute about us that attracted God's attention and caused him to love us. If God had not chosen to do something about our sin, we would have spent eternity apart from him and we would have deserved our punishment. But, God did do something, and it is

amazing. He gave us his love, and he did so in a very tangible way – he sent Jesus to die in our place so that we might live with him forever. In spite of our unattractiveness, God did not want to live without us, so he sent his own Son to take God’s punishment against sin.

You might wonder how so much truth is wrapped up in this first verse of 1 John 3. It is, of course, drawing on truth from the rest of 1 John and from the entire NT, but when John says that the Father has given an amazing love to us, he is unquestionably pointing to Jesus. The root of the Greek word for “given” is *didomi*, which is the same word John used in John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he *gave* his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” *Didomi* implies the giving of something that is of great value to the giver. What is the love that the Father has *lavished* on us, as the NIV says? Jesus!

How many people have you heard, this season, volunteer their idea of what the true meaning of Christmas is? Out of 100 who will publicly state, outside of church, what they think represents the true Christmas spirit, how many do you think will mention Jesus? A whole lot of *not many*, that’s how many. But, those who know Jesus recognize the value of the gift that the Father has given. On the other hand, those who do not know Jesus want Christmas to be about anything but Jesus, even though all the benefits of Christmas, such as love and joy and hope and peace are present because of him. God’s children have been lavished with the love of God, but the world does not know us because it did not know him. That should not shock us – Jesus said it would be this way. Do not be distracted from his love. Keep your eyes on him, and realize:

## 2. We are blessed recipients of a covenant that anticipates a glorious wedding

It is already a big deal to be called a child of God. That is possible because of the gift of God’s Son, given to us in the Incarnation, sacrificial death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, and his ascension to the right hand of the Father where he continually advocates on our behalf. That is the present. Essentially, at this point of his letter, John is saying, “You think what God has already done for you is something – you ain’t seen nothing, yet!” Well, even as simple as John’s vocabulary and grammar were, he didn’t say it quite like that. It’s what he meant, though.

Verse 2: “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.” This is as good an example of “already/not yet” as you will find anywhere in Scripture. Every believer is given the name of child of God, but we do not yet see all the advantages of being adopted into God’s family. There is no question that John is writing about Jesus’ Second Advent, or, his Second Coming. We are being presently conformed to the image of Christ but one day we will be like him because we will see him like he is. What a beautiful promise!

Although John says that we do not know what it will be like when we stand before Christ, almost all of what we do know about the new heavens and the new earth, beyond what

Jesus taught about eternal life, is the result of what Jesus revealed to John in the book of Revelation. In Revelation 19, the saints, who make up the Church, are called to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. About the bride of Christ in Revelation 19:8, it is said,

“It was granted her to clothe herself  
with fine linen, bright and pure”—  
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

Notice that it was *granted* to the bride to be clothed in fine linen that symbolized purity. The righteous deeds of the saints are only righteous in Jesus. You remember that while on earth, Jesus’ sharpest criticism was leveled against those who were considered by most, in ancient Israel, to be the most righteous – the Pharisees. Their deeds were not righteous deeds, but, rather, they were self-righteous deeds. In fact, Jesus said that they were not children of God, but, rather, he called them children of the devil. This may surprise you, but that made them mad! Truth is, we either are children of God through Jesus, or we are children of the devil.

The only way we will ever be pure enough to stand before the Lord is if he makes us so. The covenant he makes with us promises that we will not only see Jesus as the perfect Son of God, but we will be made like him, and we cannot even begin to imagine how good that will be. We affirmed God’s covenant with us through Jesus a few minutes ago at the Lord’s Table. We will never be like Jesus in his divinity, of course, but we will be restored to humanity as it was before the fall, perfect and without any hint of sin. On the day of Jesus’ appearing, as Edmund Hiebert says, “The believer’s yearning for inner Christlikeness will be fully realized.” No wonder we ought to give attention to Jesus’ Second Coming at Christmas! What a day that will be! For now, we wait. Advent is a time of waiting. Alison mentioned that yesterday while we waited for a parking spot at the mall. Alison and I both have the spiritual gift of going shopping, to restaurants, to special events, to whatever it is we are going to, at the busiest possible moment of the day. Not the busiest hour of the day, but the busiest moment of the day. What a great time it was to think about waiting for Jesus’ to come for his children! A good practice for you this week.

But, what about the Christian life here and now? Because Jesus died for us to make us pure, and since we cannot attain righteousness on our own and we will never, in this life, live without sinning, does that mean we can live as we like? Absolutely not! Verse 3 says, “And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.” That is the focus of our third and final point:

3. Those who follow Jesus have a hope that produces joyful fidelity to him

When you are engaged to be married, do you feel the freedom to date other people since you are not yet married? Once again, absolutely not! If we are engaged, as it were, to be married, should we not be chaste in our waiting for the great Bridegroom to return to earth to claim his bride? Yes we should!

There is no doubt that our faithfulness *to* Jesus begins with our faith *in* him. We are pure because we believe the gospel, not because we practice good works. It is beyond debate, though, that all true believers have a desire to live in a manner that pleases the Lord. Does that mean living by the law? No. It means living *beyond* what is required in the law because the Holy Spirit lives in us and causes us to yearn for our Savior and, thus, to deeply desire to please him in word, thought, and deed.

How can we purify ourselves? According to the gospel, we repent when we sin and yield ourselves to him, struggling, as Paul said in Colossians 1:29, with all his energy, which works so powerfully in us. How does that work? I am not sure. I have only been a believer who has sought to seriously study the Bible for 44 ½ years. When I understand it, I will let you know.

We do know that John is talking about a pattern of life here, which he will emphatically confirm in the following verses when he says that one who commits sin does not belong to Jesus. That cannot, of course, mean, that a believer will never sin. John has already said in chapter 1 that if we say that we have not sinned, we call God a liar and his Word is not in us. What he means is that when you belong to Jesus, you cannot be the same as you were before he saved you. You will sin until the day you are made perfect before him, but your heart will always be to be holy, to be like him. Will you intentionally sin? Yes, but you will be miserable. If you are a child of God, on the basis of what he has done for you through Jesus, ask him to give you a deep desire and an expectation that the Savior will return at any moment, and ask him to help you live accordingly.

This week, in my Bible reading, I found myself in Ephesians 2. I could not help but see how very connected Paul's thoughts were to John's thoughts. I wonder what that was? You don't think it has anything to do with the Holy Spirit, do you? At this place to which our hearts have been drawn in 1 John, and as we think about the gift of God's amazing and enduring love, it will be good for us to read Ephesians 2:1-10 as we close. Lord, give us thankful hearts as we read your Word:

1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Let's pray.