

## **Our Triune God is With Us!**

Matthew 28:16-20 and II Corinthians 6:3-13, 13:11-14

A Seminary student was going through the lunch line at the school cafeteria one day when he noticed a sign place above a bowl of delicious red apples which read, "Take only one, God is watching you!" Further down the line he came upon a plate of cookies with this note scrawled and placed along side of it, "Take as many as you want, God is watching the apples." Although this may only be an example of the kinds of theological jokes that Seminary students like to tell, it is really a good example of how some people think about God. You know, -the feeling that God is this being who is watching us carefully in order to record any sin or violation in some big book, or the feeling that God only watches over certain people or situations and isn't really concerned about my puny problems or activities.

Jesus said in Matthew 28:20, "I am with you always, to the close of the age." Who is this man who says he will be with us always?" Jesus also said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." That's an awesome statement for any being to make. What is the relationship between the creator God of the Old Testament and Jesus, who claimed to have authority over creation?

In the Old Testament not only did God create the world, but initially God lived in close relationship with his creation, shown in the very beginning as he walked and talked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. But intimacy with God was broken when Adam and Eve rebelled. And expelled from the Garden, life for mankind outside of Eden was never the same. Although God still desired closeness and intimacy with man, only a few like Abraham, Moses, Deborah, Elijah and David really knew God in a special way.

If we read the Psalms of David, for instance, we are struck by the reverence and love he had for God. In Psalm 63:1 he says, "O God, thou art my God, I seek thee, my soul thirsts for thee; my flesh faints for thee...my soul clings to thee; thy right hand upholds me." In Psalm 139 David writes, "Where shall I go from thy Spirit? Or where shall I flee from thy presence?" David knew God to be all around him, surrounding him, and helping him. And he knew his need for God's forgiveness and cleansing. So through many of the Psalms we see a picture of David's desire for closeness to God.

And through the words of the prophets, such as Isaiah, we can see God's desire for closeness to man. Isaiah 43 says, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you: For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior." But Israel was a stubborn and disobedient people and there was a constant cycle of repentance and restoration, followed by disobedience and consequences.

God knew that the human heart required a deep and abiding change that can only be accomplished by an inner salvation from sin if this cycle were to be broken.

So, in the fulness of time, according to God's plan, Jesus was born. And he was not just another great prophet like Elijah or Isaiah, as many cults would try to say about him. No, Jesus was the 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the Holy Trinity who took on human flesh and dwelt among us, so he was full God and fully man. Not only do we understand this from the birth narrative of Jesus in Luke's gospel, but throughout John's gospel we find the famous "I Am" statements of Jesus, pointing to his divinity. For example Jesus says, "I Am the Bread of Life", "I Am the Light of the World"; "I Am the gate for the sheep"; "I Am the Good Shepherd"; "I Am the resurrection and the Life"; and "I Am the Way, the truth and the Life." Now there have been a lot of religious leaders who have said, "I will show you the way", but Jesus is the only one who has ever said, "I am the way" and lived a godly life.

Some of you may remember a cult group about 30 years ago called the Branch Davidians down in Waco Texas and their leader David Koresh. The followers of this man actually called him "the Lamb", a title linking him to Jesus, so he was viewed as some kind of Messiah. But what I find shocking is the gullibility of the people in accepting his authority without question. Koresh physically and sexually abused children and adults alike as he kept them under his spell. It's amazing to me that the people weren't able to stop obeying Koresh, even though they knew some of his actions were not godly. Jesus said that we would know if someone is of the truth by their fruits. The fruits of David Koresh's life were jealousy, lust, fear, destruction and death.

But the fruits of Jesus' life were love, forgiveness, healing, feeding, interceding, and a self-sacrificing death on the cross. And Jesus did all of this with a true sense of who he was. Some people would insist that Jesus never really claimed to be God but the gospel of John clearly contradicts that. In chapter 8 Jesus told the Jewish leaders, "...before Abraham was, I Am." In chapter 10 Jesus says, "I and the Father are one." In both of these cases the Jewish leaders wanted to stone him to death for blasphemy for making himself equal to God, but Jesus was able to escape from them.

Later on in John 14 Philip said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." Jesus replied, "have I been with you so long and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father...believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me." Not only was Jesus sent to be the perfect sacrifice for our sins, but he was sent to show us who God really is -the character of God's perfect love for us, because Jesus and God are one. This, as well as the other verses from John, are important proofs for the deity of Christ as the 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the Trinity.

This is why Jesus could say in Matthew 28 that all authority in heaven and earth had been given to him. As the second person of the Trinity, Jesus was present with God from the very beginning of creation.

Colossians chapter 1 tells us that in Christ all things were created in heaven and on earth, and all things were created through him and for him. And that in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell. This shows the unity of essence between God and Christ. And there is also this unity with the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity.

Before Jesus died, he told his disciples that he would send the comforter, the Holy Spirit, to be with them forever. He said that the Holy Spirit, whom the Father would send in Jesus' name, would teach them all things and bring to their remembrance all that Jesus had said to them. Last week we celebrated how the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples at Pentecost and how they began extolling the glories of God in different languages heard by a multitude of people from other countries. The result of this miracle was that over 3,000 people became believers in one day.

From then on the disciples were able to boldly witness for Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit despite threats, imprisonments and beatings by Jewish and Gentile leaders. We can read about this throughout the book of Acts and the epistles written by the disciples. The Apostle Paul, once a persecutor of Christians, became one of its leading evangelists whom God greatly used to bring the gospel into Gentile nations. Paul had to persevere through many hardships; we read about some of that in our epistle reading this morning from II Corinthians 6:3-13. Paul mentions distresses, beatings, imprisonments, riots, sleepless nights, and hunger as being some of the things he had to endure.

But the hardest thing that Paul endured was when doubts about himself and false teaching started creeping in to cause turmoil in some of the churches that he planted. Corinth is a good example. The church at Corinth was weak. Surrounded by idolatry and immorality, they struggled with their Christian faith and lifestyle. Through personal visits and letters, Paul tried to instruct them in the faith, resolve their conflicts and solve some of their problems. First Corinthians was a letter Paul sent to deal with specific moral issues in the church. That letter confronted the issues directly and was well received by most. But there were false teachers who denied Paul's authority and slandered him. Paul then wrote II Corinthians to defend his position and to denounce those who were twisting the truth. He writes of his truthful speech to them and his sincere love for them. He implores them to open wide their hearts to him, just as he has loved them.

I can imagine that through all the trials and hardships that Paul faced in his ministry, it was his intimacy with God that kept him going. He knew that God was with him as he prayed diligently for the Corinthians and all the believers he was nurturing. He wanted them to know the love, joy and peace he felt as a beloved child of God. Even while he was in prison Paul wrote letter of encouragement to the people of the churches he helped to start. To the church at Ephesus he wrote how God has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ and how "in love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ."

Paul wrote these words of encouragement in Ephesians 1:17 "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints and his incomparably great power for us who believe." Reading these words we can understand that Paul desired that others would have the same intimacy with God that he experienced through the presence of the Holy Spirit in his life.

And Paul even thanked God despite his circumstances. The book of Philippians especially highlights the abundant joy that Paul felt in serving Christ despite his hardships. It amazes me that Paul could write these joyful words of encouragement while in a dank prison cell in Rome: "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near." And it was out of his own personal experience of pouring his heart out in prayer that Paul wrote the words, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Even when writing to the Corinthian church Paul desired to express his love and care for them as he exhorted them to "aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you." And lastly he wrote this benediction evoking the Holy Trinity, "may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." Knowing that our triune God is with us can be our biggest motivator, comforter and sustainer in life. It certainly was for the Apostle Paul

I also think of what John Wesley said on his death bed. You know, years ago people used to really take note of what someone said in the minutes before their death. One of the last things Wesley said was, "Best of all, God is with us!"

Friends, it is through the Holy Spirit living and abiding in our hearts that we are able to abide in God and rest in Him. This is the kind of intimacy with God that God has meant for human beings all along. And this intimacy is only made possible through faith in Jesus, the Son of God, sent to save us from our sins and reconcile us to God. Communing with God through the Holy Spirit is the greatest gift that we are given as Christians. Thus we are assured of God's presence and understand what Jesus meant when he said, "lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."

But this promise of God's abiding presence wasn't meant for us to just soak up and be self-gratified and self-absorbed about. The promise of God's abiding presence was given in the context of Christian mission and outreach, when Jesus said before he ascended into heaven, "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And **surely**, Jesus said, **surely** I am with you always to the very end of the age."

So let's go out and share this good news with others!