

**At Last** 1 John 4:16b-21

Today, we will listen to God's Word with our ears and with our hearts as we hear it in several ways. We will begin with God's Word as it comes to us in 1 John 4:16b-21. Then, we will hear the essence of the passage sung in the memorable Jazz classic "At Last," made famous by Etta James, and finally we will hear a few words from Pastor Emily as we think about this passage together and what it means for our lives. First, scripture – let's listen now for the word of the Lord. 1 John 4:16b-21. Pray.

Macy sings "At Last."

Why do you come to church? No really, I'm honestly asking this – why do you come to church? Is it to sit in this beautiful sanctuary and admire the stained glass windows? Is it to chat with friends and feel a part of a community called the Church of the Covenant? Is it to get a nice cup of coffee and a few cookies at the fellowship time in the commons? Why do you come to church? Think about that for a minute.

The folks at Gallup Polls recently asked a group of people who don't come to church why they don't come to church. The answers were not surprising. First on the list was that people don't agree with organized religion; second was that they simply don't believe God exists; third on the list was that the church asks for too much money and last, but certainly not least, was they simply don't have time. Too busy – too much to do – can't get around to it.

Now, you've had a few minutes to answer the question in your own mind, and I'm sure each one of you has come up with something different, (some of you may simply say, "I'm here because my parents made me come.") But I'm going to venture to say that underneath all of those reasons is the one simple truth that all of us in this room have figured out – and that is the simple truth that God loves us. At some point in our lives we have heard the gospel message, we have felt it on our heart, we have believed it when we read it in the pages of scripture, and so we know that God loves us. And when you come face to face with a realization like this, it changes you, indeed it actually transforms your life. It can even make you get up out of bed on a warm August morning when you'd much rather stay in. God's love just has that pull that draws you in. And those folks who answered the

Gallup Poll as to why they don't come to church, well, unfortunately, they have not yet figured out that God loves them, but when they do, all those other things will drop away and they'll come.

For some people, the knowledge that God loves them takes them from atheism into belief. For some it takes them from a life of self-destructive behavior into a life of gratitude. For some, like me, it takes them from a life working in secular culture into a life dedicated to the church. It's a different journey for all of us, but it is life-changing nevertheless.

The first letter of John that we just heard a few minutes ago is a seminal part of the Bible. It is a short letter (only 5 chapters long); its authorship is widely disputed; but its message is clear. "God is love." The church is the native habitat for this kind of message. You don't find it in the procedural manual of the Ford Motor Company, nor in the advertising of Giant Eagle, you find it only within the church. This makes us incredibly unique in the world – we are an institution that rests upon a very plain but powerful message "God is Love." Whoever lives in love, lives in God and God in him or her. And we hear it here in First John. Some scholars actually say that First John chapter 4 gets a little repetitive in how many times it tells us that God is love and that God loves us, but honestly, you just can't say that kind of thing too much.

What kind of love is this? It's not a romantic love, that's for sure. In Greek there are many words for love and here it is agape in the Greek, it literally means "to will the good of another." It is not a quid pro quo kind of love that we humans exercise all the time – I'll love you, if you love me. No, it is a love that begins with God regardless of any reciprocation on our part, gracing us with love prior to and independent of any response we might offer. Any response at all. Even no response at all. God love us first.

So, we know what First John says about love, but what evidence do we have to show us that God loves us? Well, just a few verses before our scripture passage for today, we hear that God's love was revealed to us in this way: "God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 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." That's 1 John 4: 9. Jesus came, Jesus showed us and told us all about

God's love, and Jesus got up on the cross and died for us. That is the main way that God has shown us concretely that he loves us. That, my friends, is called the gospel. You all knew that before you came here this morning and I would say that is the reason you came here this morning.

But, have you ever longed for someone or something to just come up to you in your 21<sup>st</sup> century existence, grab hold of you and tell you to your face that God loves you? To just say that this whole thing is real, the whole thing is true, this is indeed something you can stake your very life upon? Well, I had just such an experience that I would like to share with you this morning. (Even ministers need to be reminded now and again).

Up in our library we have many special books. They are carefully chosen by our library ladies and are certainly worth your attention. But there is one particular book that is in our library that I read in the last 6 months or so that really added to my life of faith. It added so much that I actually purchased copies of it to give to some folks I know who need a little more convincing that God is love. It is called "Proof of Heaven" by Dr. Eben Alexander.

Doctor Alexander is an extremely accomplished neurosurgeon, completing a residency at Duke and 15 years at the Harvard Medical School. He spent a lifetime doing brain surgery and considered himself a scientist par excellence. Although he knew the gospel, Dr. Alexander could simply not reconcile his knowledge of neuroscience with any belief in heaven, God or the soul. And that difficulty created an empty space within him that no professional triumph could erase.<sup>1</sup>

On November 10, 2008, Dr. Alexander contracted bacterial meningitis that put him into a deep coma for seven days. It was in this coma that he finally came to learn what you and I already know, that God is love and that God loves us. While in the coma, Dr. Alexander traveled to the spiritual world, heaven if you will, led by his deceased sister whom he had never met. He eventually came into the presence of God. He received a message from God that he would never forget – a message that he has spent the rest of his lifetime trying to convey to others. Here it is in his own words:

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander, Eben, *Proof of Heaven* (Simon and Schuster, 2012) book cover blurb.

*“The message came in three parts, and to take a shot at putting it into words, (because of course it was delivered wordlessly) it would run something like this: You are loved and cherished. You have nothing to fear. There is nothing you can do wrong. If you had to boil this entire message down to one sentence, it would run this way: You are loved. And if I had to boil it down even further, to just one word, it would be (of course), simply love.”*

Miraculously, Dr. Alexander came out of the coma and has dedicated his life to letting people know that the spiritual world is real and that God loves us. He knows that God and the soul are real and that death is not the end of our existence but only a transition into another life. The parallels between Dr. Alexander’s account and the First John passage are stunning. Both accounts tell us not to fear meeting God and both accounts tell us that God loves us.

These realizations changed Dr. Alexander’s life forever. It brought him from questioning faith to certainty in his belief. For me, this was like a wonderful 21<sup>st</sup> century slap in the face – yes indeed, the gospel is true!

This brings us to our sermon song for today. Darla and Macy just performed the jazz classic ***At Last*** by Etta James. It tells the story of a person who longs to be loved and when finally she meets her true true love, she sings, “At last, my love has come along, my lonely days are over and life is like a song. . . . You smiled and the spell was cast and here we are in heaven for you are mine at last.” This is a song that can be applied to an earthly love for sure, a love between a man and a woman. But I ask you to stretch your mind a little bit as we hear it in context with our scripture from 1 John 4. I urge you to think of this song in a fresh new way. For 1 John 4: 17 tells us this:

“Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have **boldness on the day of judgment**, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear . . . .”

Once you realize, my friends, that God loves you, once you know that he sent his son to the cross to forgive your sins, once you know it so well that you are ready to get out of bed for it on a Sunday morning, you no longer have to fear anything anymore, let alone death. You are ready to see God face to face and to sing along with Miss Etta James, “*At last, God has come along, my lonely days are over and*

*eternal life is like a song.*” I guarantee you Dr. Eben Alexander sang that song is his heart when he finally realized how much God loves him, “At last.” I guarantee you that our dear members of the Church of the Covenant who have passed this summer – Dottie, Jean, Bob & Marge – have all sung that song when they saw the face of God, “At Last.” And we will sing it to, because we are among the very lucky folks in this world who get up on Sunday morning and come to church because we know that God loves us.

Praise be to God. Amen.

