

December 20, 2020

Pastor Dan Hollis

Part of what's so difficult about being a preacher these days is that preaching to an empty room is *not* the same as preaching to a crowd of people—people who react to you, and whose energy you can feed off of in return. Not only does it leave you with something... missing... but it also means that I can't shift tracks on the fly if I feel like people *are* or *aren't* picking up what I'm putting down.

Some of my colleagues in ministry put stuffed animals in their pews so they have someone to preach to, and some use those Blockbuster-style cardboard cutouts of like John McClane from "Die Hard," or Legolas from "Lord of the Rings," or Hermione from "Harry Potter," and yes I *would* watch a crossover movie starring all three of those characters, I mean come on!

Sadly, Pastor Eric said I couldn't expense cardboard cutouts of the entire cast of the Baywatch reboot to fill the pews, so I kind of had to think outside the box. Let's experiment a little here.

Why did the chicken cross the road? To get to the other side.

way too enthusiastic laugh-track

That's what I'm talking about. Much better.

The reason I'm futzing around with this is because I wanted to start this sermon with a question—one that if we were in person I would want the gathered congregation to respond to before I continued on. So let's give this a try.

Does God love you?

disappointing "yeah" audio

Mm, that wasn't quite what I was looking for. Let me try again.

Does God love you?

actual cheering this time along with "yes" audio

Okay, it's obviously not going to be the same as having all of you in here. But at least it sounded a little more *certain* this time.

Because God *does* love you!

I've preached before about my belief that an infinite God loves infinitely, and how incredible it is to imagine that infinite love zeroed in on *you* individually. The core of my whole religious understanding is what I see as the *fact* revealed through Jesus Christ that God truly loves each and every one of us, God's children.

But if you answered the question, "Does God love you," with "yes," then the question that follows *is*: "How do you know?"

Reverend Estelle would always roll her eyes whenever she heard “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so,” and more than once she jokingly asked me for the chapter-and-verse that song was supposed to be based on. The same stands true for the song, “Jesus Loves the Little Children,” because those *words* were never actually in the Bible. And never in the Bible did Jesus say, “I love the little children.”

But the point of that isn’t that Reverend Estelle thought God didn’t love us—of course she didn’t. The Bible does actually say, after all, in John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...”

The point is that in his time here on Earth, Jesus didn’t show his love for us in just words, he showed his love for us through his actions. The things that he did.

We know that Jesus loves the little children, because when they would gather around him, he wouldn’t let the disciples hinder them, “and he took them up in his arms, laid hands on them, and blessed them.”

Now I could go through the whole Bible book by book and point out for you all the different places that God shows God’s love for *us* through *action*, not word, but I don’t think that would be the most constructive use of our time. No, what I want you to ponder today, to really think hard about, to look for in your mind, is “what are God’s actions *today* that show that God loves *you*?”

In our Scripture reading for today, we have an example of *one* way that God showed God loved someone. For *Mary*, the proof that God loved her was pretty *surprising*. Jarring, I’d imagine. This *normal* young woman, a woman without riches, without an expensive education, without much agency of her own in that ancient world... she was so *avored* by God that God gave her an incredible gift. For *her*, the sign that God loved her was the gift of a special child—the Son of God, the very *being* of God funneled into a human life. She even got an *angel* to appear to tell her just how much God cared for her.

Now, just as every love that we have in our lives is different from any of the others—children, parents, romances, friends, pets—God’s love for each of us is revealed in different ways.

God doesn’t give us *all* a *child* to show us God loves us, and God certainly doesn’t gift each of us with the honor of birthing God’s own Son. That was just *Mary’s* proof.

What’s *your* proof? What’s your proof that God loves you?

And that’s not an easy question. On Thursday, I had a regular Zoom meeting with a small group of fellow pastors in other churches in Maine, and the facilitator of our group, Marcia, asked us the kind of question that pastors ask our congregations all the time: “What is your angel voice telling you these days?” You know, because we’re all talking about the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary to give her good tidings of great joy, but Marcia

wanted to know what the angels God is sending to *us* are telling *us*? What are we hearing over Angel Radio?

And wouldn't you know it, the whole group of us sat in awkward silence for a little too long, because that question, which we would ask our congregations without even blinking, turned out to be kind of hard for us to answer. Especially during Advent and Christmas time. How busy we are, especially in the middle of a pandemic, trying to make everyone's Christmas season special. Holy. Full. How much turmoil our own heads and hearts are beset by right now. I had to admit, I haven't been *listening* for any angel voices since basically December 1st. I haven't had the bandwidth for Angel Radio.

That's not the question I'm asking you today, but it bears with it the same wisdom. How do you know God loves you? And the only way you can have an *answer* to that question is if you've been paying attention. If you've been on the *lookout* for it.

Does God love you?

repeat of the "yeah" audio

Then I don't want you to just believe it "for the Bible tells you so." I want you to *know* it. I want you to have that same moment of surprised realization that Mary had when an angel appeared in blinding light to give her a holy tracking number on a *real* special delivery.

I want you to think back throughout your life for all the love letters, big and small, that God has been sending to *you*, not by word but by *action*. Maybe some that you recognized in the moment, maybe some that you only made sense of years later, and maybe, like me, some that you just didn't have the bandwidth to receive at the time.

And I want you to keep your eyes open. Stay on watch, like those shepherds with their flocks by night. To recognize God's actions that show you in a way words never can that the God that created you—the God that *is* above and beyond and *within* all things—loves you with all that God is.

Show me the proof. Who cares about me—show it to *yourself*. Don't just answer "yes" because I'm a pastor asking a church full of people to respond in a certain way. Answer "yes" because you have *proof*. Proof that God loves you *infinitely*.

It's *there*.

How does God show it to *you*? *When* does God show you?

And... like Mary... what will you do with that knowledge?

Let's find out together. Amen.