

“The Revelation of God”

a sermon by

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Text: “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture” (John 10:9).

Over the past several years there has been a great deal of attention given to the wide disparity between the rich and poor in this country. This is not only true with individuals such as Bill Gates and Warren Buffet, but it is true of institutions as well. This past week the *Wall Street Journal* noted that the endowment of Harvard University was 35 billion dollars. There are now 60 universities in the United States with endowments over one billion dollars.

Conan O’Brien, the late night television host, was one of the commencement speakers at Harvard several years ago. O’Brien, who is a graduate of Harvard, noted that the development people at most of the colleges and universities today are a relentless group. He noted that Harvard had just completed a 3 billion capital campaign. He said they did it by starting with the graduates whose names ended with an “A” and by the time they had gone through those whose names ended with a “B” they had raised the 3 billion dollars. He went on to say that he had received a call one night from the development office. It was right after dinner, a time when most people might be feeling a bit mellow. When they asked him for money for the university, he replied by saying that the university had just raised 3 billion dollars and he wondered why they needed his money.

“Oh, we don’t need it,” came the reply, “we just want it.”

I don’t know how it is at your house during the Christmas season, but at my house, I think there is sometimes confusion between what we want and what we really need.

I.

Over the weeks of Advent we are looking again at four of the famous “I am” sayings in the Gospel of John, where Jesus speaks of himself as “the light of the world, the way, truth, and life, the good shepherd, the true vine, the door, and the resurrection and the life.” In each of these sayings, we have noted that there is a pattern that is consistent throughout the gospel of John. The pattern begins with one of the “I am” sayings. This is followed by an extended discourse between Jesus and those around him. Then it concludes with an action of Jesus that demonstrates his word.

This morning we are looking at the passage from John 10 where Jesus identifies himself as ‘the gate.’ By this he refers to himself as the gate to the pen where sheep were kept. The door to which Jesus refers was a large wooden door that was carefully locked. There was a gatekeeper who was in charge of the door. The shepherds were allowed in. Everyone else was kept out. Jesus refers to himself as the “good shepherd.” In verse nine he says “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.” He notes that thieves come to steal, kill, and destroy, but Jesus’ mission is to bring life and to bring it abundantly.

The action that confirms Jesus as the gate moves both forward and backward in the Gospel of John. In John, Chapter 5, Jesus brings healing to a man at the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem. In chapter 11 Jesus raises his friend Lazarus from the dead. In both cases, Jesus brings salvation to one in distress. That is what it means to believe that Jesus is the “gate.” He opens for us the path to salvation.

II.

There is nothing more essential in this Advent season than to face head-on the reality of human sin. When the Gospel of Matthew announces the birth of Jesus, the angel says to Jesus’ father Joseph, “You shall call his name Jesus for he shall save his people from their sin.” (Matthew 1:21). The recognition of this tragic fact of human nature, far from being the beginning of discouragement, is the beginning of hope. The person who is afraid to face this is the person who is unprepared to confront the realistic fact of life. “All have sinned,” writes the Apostle Paul, “and fallen short of the glory of God.” The New Testament affirms this at every single point. It is a radiant and triumphant book. But it begins with this tragic fact, “Even when we were dead in our trespasses.” And then it saw that a saving power had been released into the world through Christ, which could redeem individuals and groups of individuals. It started with the night and then it saw a star and was glad.

III.

Then, too, when the Gospel of John speaks of the saving power of Christ, it addresses a word to each one of us. No person can understand himself or herself without understanding that there is something fundamentally wrong with us that by our own power we cannot overcome.

There is a story that was told in the ancient church about a religious hermit, so holy that the evil spirits sent to tempt him were discouraged. They could not break him down. They tried the passions of the body and failed. They tempted him with doubt, but that too was unsuccessful. Then Satan himself entered into the picture. He went to this poor holy hermit and said to him, “Have you heard the good news? Your brother has been made Bishop of Alexandria.” Suddenly, this poor hermit was overcome with jealousy. He could stand anything except the success of his brother. What I am saying is that there is no one of us who is immune to the power of envy, jealousy, greed, and self-centeredness.

In this regard we often deceive ourselves in our understanding of sin. We often regard sin as the big things people do: lust and adultery, anger and killing, envy and greed. But sin goes way beyond these kinds of things. It is self-indulgence, callousness, pride, and self-

righteousness. It not only hurts us, it hurts those around us. Go through the great literature of our heritage and you will see that the great poets and novelists understood that there was something fundamentally wrong with human nature. Start with great Greek tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles and work your way through Macbeth, Othello, Hamlet, King Lear, Faust, Les Miserables and the Scarlet Letter. All of the great seers have explored the nature of human sinfulness and the tragic consequence that this has on the lives of some many people.

But this recognition of the fundamental aspect of human nature is not a sense of discouragement. It is the beginning of hope. That is what the New Testament is all about, trying to get each of us to take this aspect of our lives seriously, and then to seek a cure for this malady.

Go through this highly respectable congregation here and who of us does not need this? For some of his have sinned secretly and we are afraid that our secret sins will be made public. Some of us have done things we know we should not have done and we are overwhelmed with guilt, remorse, and fear. Some of us have done things that not only have hurt us, but our family, loved ones, and friends as well.

Every person in this sanctuary knows what I am talking about. This isn't Greek to anyone. No one understands himself until he sees this. No one understands Christ's coming into the world apart from this. That is why John's gospel refers to Christ as the "gate." It is the one who ushers us from a darkness of guilt, anxiety, and remorse, to the light of repentance, forgiveness, and a new life. No one understands Christ's central meaning apart from this. This is what we celebrate at Christmas. As Clement of Alexander observed many years ago, "He has changed the sunset into sunrise."

IV.

There is nothing more important for us in this Advent Season than to focus on the coming of Christ in this world. For he came to a world of deep darkness to bring light. And he came to a world filled with sin to bring the power of his forgiveness.

When Tom Gillespie preached here a few years ago, he told of a trip he and his wife had taken to Europe with a group of other tourists. In Italy they noticed most of the churches were art galleries. In England the churches seem more like historical museums.

In his sermon he told of an older woman in his travel group who was very outspoken. She was a retired school teacher and she did not hesitate speaking her mind. As their tour group was visiting one of the great cathedrals in London, she blurted out to the tour guide, "When was the last time someone got saved in one of these churches?"

Think what a difference it would make for each one of us this Christmas if for once, we got not what we wanted but what we need—redemption from the power of sin and death.

Amen!