

Sermon 12-6-20, God with us as sustainer

A little boy named Billy had a question about his family's devotion. Trying to understand what the writer was saying about God, he asked, "Mom, the devotion said that God is everywhere. Is that really true?"

His mother replied, "Of course it is Billy."

Billy, then asked, "Is God up in the sky?"

His mother answered, "Yes, I'm sure he is."

Which led Billy to ask, "Then is God in my belly?"

Not knowing quite what to say, she responded, "I'm not sure, but I guess he is."

Billy stood silently for a moment and then said, "Mommy, I'm pretty sure that God is telling me that he wants a cookie."

Christmas is a time for cookies, for celebrations, for decorations, and for eating! I recently read that that the average person gains 10 pounds between Halloween and New Years. I am afraid that I resemble that statistic. But hey, a person has to eat. We need food. We need air and water and shelter. There are so many things that we need. Have you given much thought to where those things come from?

Last week, we talked about Jesus, Immanuel, who has been here with us from the very beginning as the creator. But Christmas reminds us that Jesus is much more. At Christmas Jesus came to earth to be with us as one of us, a baby born in a manger. He then walked among us, continuing his work of bringing order out of chaos. Jesus came as a part of his continuing work of sustaining us by providing for our needs.

That is what I would like to talk about today, about Jesus, who is with us as the sustainer, providing what we need. Let me read from John 6:

Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

So they asked him, "What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. 33 For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

"Sir," they said, "always give us this bread."

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

— John 6:29-35

Surveys tell us that most Americans believe in God as Creator. If you ask them where this world came from they will tell you it was created by God. But many stop there. They believe that God created

everything but have doubts about whether God is involved in their daily lives. They believe that God set everything in motion, that he created the laws of science and physics that govern it, but have strong doubts but how active God is in the world today. They have doubts about whether God much cares about their daily lives.

However, the Bible is clear. God is as active in the world today as he was at creation. Indeed, we were promised that Jesus would neither leave us or forsake us. Jesus continues to work in the world maintaining, sustaining, and providing us with what we need.

Thus in Colossians chapter 1:15-17 we read:

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

Jesus not only created everything, he continues to hold it together. Which is a good thing because if Jesus stopped holding things together this world would soon cease to exist. But we do not need to fear that. For in John 5:17, Jesus explains, **“My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.”**

Did you hear that? Jesus doesn't sleep. He doesn't take a vacation. He is always there doing the work of maintaining his creation. I take comfort in the belief that despite all the stupid, destructive things we humans do Jesus has and will hold the creation together.

How does Jesus do that? Well, how did he create it in the beginning? God did it through his Word. Thus, we read in Hebrews 1:3 **“The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.”**

Are you beginning to see how it all fits together? In the beginning was the Word, and the Word's name was Jesus. All things were created through him. And not only did he create this world he continues to maintain and sustain it through the power of his Word.

On the macro level Jesus sustains the creation, the universe and this world we live in. But it doesn't stop there. Jesus not only sustains the world, he also sustains each one of us. Why would the God of the entire universe care about what every last one of us needs? God cares because he is love. He loves us and cannot help but care about his children, especially when they are in need.

In the early part of John chapter 6, Jesus was teaching a large crowd of over 5,000, when he learned that they were hungry and had nothing to eat. His heart went out to them and he provided them with physical sustenance in the form of an all you can eat bread and seafood buffet.

Jesus fed them but he did not stop with providing physical sustenance. He knew that they needed more. Thus, the next day, when the people he had fed went in search of him, Jesus welcomed them and offered something better than loaves and fish. When the crowd found Jesus they reminded him that God had provided their ancestors with daily manna in the wilderness. They were giving Jesus a not-so-subtle hint that they were hungry again. They pointed out that, when they were in the wilderness, God had fed them miraculously every day, so it seemed only reasonable that Jesus would provide them with another miraculous meal. Right?

They certainly thought so, but do you recall how Jesus answered them? Jesus responded, **“I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves**

and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.” — John 6:26-27

Jesus knew that they had followed him seeking physical food. They wanted someone to provide them with a free meal. That is not a bad thing. Our need for food is real. But, as Jesus pointed out, food was not their deepest need. They had other ways to meet their physical needs. They knew where to find food. Jesus did not come to feed them physically. He came to meet a much deeper need. He came to minister to them spiritually. You see, few in the crowd were starving physically, but most had little or no spiritual nourishment.

Jesus informed them that he had come to provide spiritual nourishment not an all you can eat buffet. Unsurprisingly, that was not what the crowd wanted to hear. When they learned that Jesus was not going to provide them with loaves and fish they started to grumble. They had not walked all the way around the lake to hear a sermon. They wanted dinner.

Don't get me wrong. There is nothing wrong with feeding people. On several occasions Jesus fed the hungry. He asked us to feed the hungry, too. He pointed out that when we feed them we are caring for him. The truth is that we can't carry out our mission of making disciples by leading people to Christ if people are hungry. After all, it is hard to think about spiritual things when your belly is empty and you don't know where your next meal is coming from.

Heaven knows there are a lot of struggling families who need food. There are people here in the TriCities who are hungry, who don't know where their next meal will come from. We are trying to meet their needs. That is why we have fed and provided toiletries to nearly a thousand people this year. There are volunteers from this church who are working with the food Bank Bank, with Second Harvest, and who are providing meals themselves. Jesus was clear. When we are aware of hungry people, we are called to do what we can to feed them.

That said, there are far more pressing needs than just food. Most Americans do not go to bed with empty bellies. If anything, most Americans, myself included, have more than enough to eat. Still, I can safely say that, like the crowd Jesus addressed that day, most of us are hungry. We are spiritually hungry. We are physically overfed and spiritually starving.

Yet, not unlike the crowd, we come to Jesus asking for more food. We cry out, "Bless us Jesus. Jesus please provide me with that new job, the new car, the house on the hill..." This is especially true at Christmas when everywhere we turn we hear about the latest, greatest thing that we didn't even know we needed until they told us we did. Many of the fastest growing churches in our nation preach a prosperity gospel, promising that if we will join them in following Jesus he will provide us with all the fish and bread we could ever desire. All we have to do is "name it and claim it" and Jesus will provide.

Like the crowd that followed Jesus we are searching for a bigger and better buffet, for a free meal. Don't misunderstand me. I like to eat just as much as the next person. There is nothing wrong with wanting to have our physical needs met.

The problem comes when we become so caught up in what we want to eat that we pay no attention to being nourished spiritually. We get into trouble when we care more about filling our stomachs than we do about making sure that our spirits are full.

Indeed, most people are starving spiritually. They know they are hungry, but they don't realize what they are hungry for. They don't know what they need, so they try to quench their spiritual hunger with food,

or sex, or recreation, or drugs, or pleasure. The thing is that, while those things can distract us from our spiritual hunger for a while, they cannot sate our hunger.

That's an important reminder, especially at Christmas. For, you see, when Jesus was with God in the beginning, he didn't just create everything and abandon it to go its own way. Jesus continues to work in our world, maintaining and sustaining it. He is still at work today. Jesus does not abandon us to try to find our own way. He continues to work in our lives, helping us, guiding us, filling us, nourishing us spiritually, if we let him. But we have to let him.

Christmas is a wonderful time of year. It is a time for food, family, and friends. It will likely be different this year, as we try to celebrate safely, but I encourage you to celebrate in all the ways you safely can. Enjoy the food. Enjoy the presents. Enjoy the celebration.

But I want to caution you not to neglect the spiritual nourishment that Jesus came to offer. After all the Bible does not tell us that God sent his only son into the world to feed the world and provide them with Christmas presents. Jesus is not Santa Claus. Oh, he brought gifts. He fed people. But his primary mission was to bring spiritual nourishment, to offer us the possibility of entering into a deep, loving relationship with him. So, enjoy Christmas and all its trappings, but do not forget what Christmas is about.

What is Christmas about? Christmas is a celebration of Jesus, who came to earth in the form of a human baby to continue his sustaining work of calling us into a spiritual relationship with God. And that is work that he continues to this day.

Last week, I said that I hoped that we could look back to the manger and see more than Jesus as a little baby. I hoped that we could also see that Jesus is also the Creator who created everything around us, including us. And I also hope that we can see that Jesus is still with us today as Immanuel, God with us, sustaining us. Certainly he is the one who provides for our needs, sustaining us physically. But more than that he wants to sustain our spirits.

He wants you to know that if you are feeling a little empty, not in your stomach, but in your spirit, he is there to fill that emptiness. If you are feeling hungry for more than food that satisfies for the moment, Jesus is the Bread of Life that can satisfy us eternally. And that is the gift Jesus offers us and is asking us to offer to others.

Indeed, that is our mission. We are called to **make disciples by loving people exactly as they are in very practical ways and leading them to Christ.** That means we are to feed and meet the physical needs of our struggling neighbors this holiday season, but we are also to offer the gift of Jesus, who promises not only to feed us physically but to feed us spiritually, as well.

So, what is our scripture passage for this week? What is the scripture I am asking you to meditate on and memorize? It is John 6:27, "**Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.**" May that be a gift you both receive and give this Christmas season.