

“Always Good Things from God”
By Rev. James C. Ramsey, Pastor
(Outdoors)

Texts: Psalm 103:17; Hebrews 13:8
Matthew 7:7-11

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Today I continue my summer sermon series titled “Gospel Gems.” Every Sunday we’ll alight on a particular story of Jesus, something he said or did. I think of scripture and especially the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, as a treasure chest, filled with wisdom, inspiration and challenge – valuable gems enriching our spiritual life! This morning’s Gospel Gem: familiar words from Jesus, which compliment nicely what our children learned all week!

I spent quality time this week with the main presenter at our Vacation Bible School’s Opening and Closing... a guest to our church – the esteemed, if absent-minded, Professor Agape -- the director of the Wormhole Research Center at Einstein University, and his quirky assistant, Phineas, who was fated to be the time traveler for the week!...What a pleasure to talk with a scientist, even if I had no idea what we were talking about, what with his references to “warp speed modulator,” “fliggy-wiggy doodle-ometer” and “destination time display.”

The Professor guided us back, with fits and starts, back through the decades, to East Union’s very first Vacation Bible School, 70 years ago, held in 1948. We had nearly 60 children help us celebrate that fads and fashions come and go, but God’s everlasting love never goes out of style. As the Psalmist puts it, the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting.

I’m so proud to lead a congregation committed for the long haul to teaching children the Good News of the Gospel. I was humbled and gratified as I watched so many of our people sharing their time and gifts, helping and pitching in to make this week, again this year, a welcoming, uplifting, meaningful time for the kids of our community – and the kids responded...that’s what makes the hours and the effort so rewarding...seeing the faces, hearing the stories, watching the enthusiasm.

I know the children heard the message in multiple ways – that God loves them and wants good things for them, no matter what is happening in the world or what difficulties they might encounter. It’s not just a message for children. I hope you get that message, too. God loves you and intends well-being for you. The rotten, painful, degrading discouragement that we all feel at one time or another does not come from God. Jesus Christ is the anti-venom for despair, always has been – yesterday, today and forever.

Most of us have been intrigued and confused by Jesus promise that “if you ask, you will receive, whoever searches, finds...everyone who knocks will get an open door...” We would love to believe these words, but our experience does not always bear them out. We don’t perceive ourselves as ones who get what we want...how many times have we searched (for an answer, for support, for a break) and never found one...all of us have encountered closed doors, so closed they seem hopeless.

Yet, Jesus insists God is a giver, a provider, an opener, a rescuer. The end of this confounding text basically has Jesus’ asking, “Don’t you understand that your Father in Heaven is all about giving good things to his people who ask?” Jesus would have us know that we get “Always Good Things

from God.” The children learned exactly this in Bible School—through time—through the experiences of Moses, Rahab, David and Peter. How much of this do you remember?

The Israelites had been enslaved in Pharaoh’s Egypt for generations. They cried out to God in their suffering...and the God of their ancestors heard their prayer. God would save His people through a stuttering, runaway shepherd.

In the land of Midian stood Moses, a Hebrew son raised as an Egyptian prince. But after murdering an Egyptian slavemaster, Moses fled to this foreign land and made for himself a quiet life. As he tended his flock of sheep, something caught his eye. He went over to investigate a bush that was on fire but not burning up. From that bush, on that holy ground, God spoke to Moses, revealing God’s plan to save His people.

Moses would return to Egypt and demand that Pharaoh release the Israelites. God would give them signs so that they would believe and obey. Moses struggled with his calling, believing he was unfit and unworthy for such a task. He didn’t sign up for such a job...and he didn’t want it. But God reassured His fearful servant, as God assures us.

God hears us. God is with us. God has a plan to save us. God’s love is incredible! God led his people out of Egypt with signs and wonders...and eventually led them to the Promised Land. Two spies were sent into Jericho to scope out the land, but they needed a place to stay among unfamiliar people. They went to the house of a woman named Rahab. She had a bad reputation, but a great location --- and a very special purpose in God’s plan.

Rahab believed in a God she had yet to meet and she chose to side with Him. She hid the two spies on her rooftop, underneath stalks of flax. When it was safe, she let the men down the city wall on a red rope, snaked out her window. But not before she asked that they return the favor. When the Israelites returned to conquer Jericho, they would spare everyone in her house – so long as she hung the rope from her window.

Rahab kept her word and so did God. Not only did God save Rahab, but also made her an ancestor of the Messiah, who would save the whole world. To Rahab, as to us, God’s love is faithful.

When Israel took Jericho, Rahab remained and lived among God’s people. God would use her descendants to write history – starting with a most unexpected warrior.

The army of Israel was lined up against the infamous Philistines. I’m sure you know this story...Every day a mammoth of a man, a true giant, stepped out to taunt and challenge the Israelites, daring them to send an opponent out to face him. And every day the same thing happened. Nothing. Even the strongest soldiers in Israel were intimidated and afraid.

Until the day when a shepherd boy brought food to the front lines. The boy’s name was David, and he couldn’t believe the way the enemy soldier was talking about the God of Israel. Even more, he couldn’t believe that no one was willing to stand up to him.

Confident in the God who had protected him in the fields, from bears and lions, which he imagined more fierce than this big, blustery Philistine, David stepped forward. He would face the giant with a simple but familiar weapon, his trusty slingshot.

David took five stones into the battle, but he would only need one. He ran toward Goliath and slung a stone into the air. The battle was over almost before it started. God and David struck the giant down. The battle was won. The battle was God’s all along. Then and forever. God’s love is invincible.

From the line of David, Jesus was born to save the world. He lived and died and rose again in power.

He demonstrated love and forgiveness in his life, and death and resurrection. Jesus ascended into heaven, and not long after the Holy Spirit came, inspiring Jesus' disciples and giving birth to the church.

Years after this, Jesus' followers faced horrible persecution. Yet they remained faithful, having church meetings in secret to teach, worship and pray. Some Christians were found out and executed. The church had much to pray about. Peter, a leader of the Christians, had been arrested and faced a grim fate. Men and women stayed awake well into the night to pray.

Peter, himself, though, was not overly concerned. He was sleeping soundly, chained between two soldiers when an angel nudged him awake. His chains fell off and Peter followed the angel through the prison to the gate and freedom. Only then did Peter realize he wasn't dreaming. He went to the house where his praying friends were gathered.

He knocked at the door and called out. A servant girl knew Peter's voice and ran to tell the others. But she must be mistaken, they thought. After some convincing, they opened the door and saw the real Peter standing before them—it was a miracle. Peter left quickly, but not before the church got the message they would share throughout time: God's love is real. It changes everything!

There are bad things in this world, but they don't come from God – it is God, in Christ, who helps us navigate the negativity and the evil we will inevitably come across. In fact, reading Jesus' words in the parallel passage from Luke, Jesus substitutes "Holy Spirit" for "good things." ...suggesting that God is synonymous with good things. No matter your age, embrace the message of Christ, we can expect – "Always Good Things from God!"

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.