

## *Walking in the Light*

1<sup>st</sup> Weekend after Christmas ~ December 30/31, 2006

### Sermon Background Study

1 *John* 1:5-2:6 (NRSV)

<sup>5</sup>This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. <sup>6</sup>If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; <sup>7</sup>but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. <sup>8</sup>If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup>If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. <sup>10</sup>If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; <sup>2</sup>and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

<sup>3</sup>Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments. <sup>4</sup>Whoever says, "I have come to know him," but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; <sup>5</sup>but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him: <sup>6</sup>whoever says, "I abide in him," ought to walk just as he walked.

*The light that is Christ has overcome the darkness.  
But John wants to know if we are still walking where  
the lights are off.*

Next week, we, as a congregation, will begin a months-long journey toward true transformation. We will search for the life we've always wanted, the title of the upcoming sermon series. We will strive to discover who God has really created us to be. We won't just make another well-intentioned but unkept resolution; we will embrace God's Spirit and real change. We will learn how to put Christ at the center of every sphere of our lives. And, in that, we will learn true joy and fulfillment.

Sounds like a pretty big promise, doesn't it. Can we really do it? Won't the routine and non-routine of our lives get in the way? Can we really change for any longer than a few days? In his letter, John draws our eyes to what is really possible. To paraphrase Dallas Willard, God didn't give us this glorious Testament to Jesus only so we can see what can't be done. We may think we can't root out sin from our lives, overcoming all that separates us from God, but John the Apostle and John Wesley urge us to think and act otherwise.

*Walking as Jesus walked*<sup>1</sup>

John Wesley adopted the practice of leading congregations in an annual Covenant Service, which came to be most often held on New Years Eve. This "Covenant Renewal Service" is still in the UMC Book of Worship in the same form used in 1780. I invite you to read through it. You can find it on-line. You'll discover that the language is . . . stout. It is a serious covenant built upon sincere confession and

### Reading With Heart & Mind Begins tomorrow!

Beginning tomorrow, I invite you to join me in learning the art of the spiritual reading. For the next twelve months, we'll go through selected books of the Bible, reading only one story or key passage each day. Here's a few tips that might help make this meaningful:

- Read the story or passage twice during the day, once in the morning and once in the evening. This will help you to keep the story in your heart and mind throughout the day, living with it and letting it work within you.
- Keep some index cards with your Bible. Write down each day a phrase or a few words that catch your eye in the passage. Keep this card with you and glance at it once in awhile during the day. For example, you could set it on your desktop so it catches your eye from time to time.
- Find a discussion partner, someone with whom you can talk over the stories several times during the week. This might be your spouse or a friend. Sharing your thoughts and hearing those of someone else is a key way of getting into the story or passage.

The daily passages are incorporated into the page three Bible readings that have always been part of these Sermon Background Studies. For example, this week's readings are all taken from the opening chapters of Genesis. These stories are foundational to all that follows in the Bible. I once listened to a set of lectures on OT theology – nearly half of them were spent on Genesis 1-11!

These studies are in each bulletin and are posted on-line at [www.standrewacademy.org](http://www.standrewacademy.org). I will also devote a page on the Academy's website to a listing of each week's readings, so you can see them all as the year develops.

<sup>1</sup>D. Moody Smith's commentary on 1 John in the *Interpretation* series was a big help here. A copy is in the St. Andrew library.

genuine commitment. The covenant is grounded upon giving ourselves to God completely, holding nothing back. It is about trusting obedience of Christ in all things. The UMC cautions that the covenant is such “hearty fare” that congregations must be prepared for it, lest it become empty words.

Wesley’s service is of one mind with today’s Scripture passage. John is forthright about sin, claiming that anyone who denies its reality has deceived themselves and don’t know what is true (1:8). John is also clear that when we acknowledge and admit our sins, God graciously forgives them (1:9). And it gets even better. If we do sin, then Jesus is our Advocate, our attorney, who takes our side and argues our case. But the most profound Good News is this: by his death on the cross, Jesus has overcome not only our sin but the sin of the whole world, putting us “at-one” with God.

If you’ve spent much time around church, chances are you are used to the language in the last paragraph. The vocabulary of sin, sacrifice, and forgiveness comes easily to us – to some degree, we “get it.” But John’s next paragraph is, like Wesley’s service, . . . stout.

#### A Curriculum for Christlikeness

John Ortberg’s book, *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*, is the foundation for the sermon series that begins next week. In it, Ortberg acknowledges that his goal in writing the book was to give readers a sort of “Dallas Willard-lite.” Several years ago, Dallas Willard published *The Divine Conspiracy*, an enormously rewarding and insightful but admittedly challenging book. In it, Dr. Willard lays out a practical approach to discipleship, what he calls a “curriculum for Christlikeness.” Much of his book is devoted to the Sermon on the Mount. “Surely,” he writes, “Jesus wouldn’t urge his disciples to hear Jesus’ words and act on them unless they could actually do so.” In other words, and echoing John Wesley, surely the Sermon on the Mount is not an impossible ideal.

Dr. Willard suggests that we ought to have two primary objectives as we strive to be authentic disciples, those who hear and do. First, we must learn “to dearly love and constantly delight in the heavenly Father made real to earth in Jesus . . . certain that there is no ‘catch’.” Second, we have to remove our automatic responses against the kingdom of God – as in “what do you mean, love my enemies. That’s impossible!”

We will find delight in the Lord when we learn to let our minds and hearts dwell upon his love and goodness. We find joy in God. A psalmist wrote: “I keep the Lord always before me . . . In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:8-11). In the upcoming sermon series, we’ll talk about the spiritual discipline of celebration – which doesn’t even sound like a discipline!

The irony here is that we do not become authentic and obedient disciples of Jesus Christ by first striving to be obedient! Invariably, we reduce such an effort to an exercise in rule-keeping. Rather, the path of discipleship – the narrow gate, the hard road, the house built on rock – begins with learning to love God and neighbor and discovering that habits of goodness begin to replace habits of selfishness.

#### Knowing God

How can you be sure that you actually know God and aren’t just kidding yourself? John is clear – we know that we know God because we are obedient. And if we aren’t obedient, then we don’t know God (2:3-6). We “ought to walk just as he [Jesus] walked.” Really. We ought to live as Jesus lived.

For both Johns (the Apostle and Wesley), true faith is expressed in good works. We can’t divorce faith from ethics. How we live expresses how well we know God. Whether or not we are obedient tests our claim to have faith in Jesus Christ. Faithful obedience is not merely something to strive for, but to achieve.

Stout words. Stouter ideas. Countless times I’ve been asked whether what we do really matters in the end. Why be “good” if it is all about grace? It is all about grace and that is precisely why we are called to be good and expected to actually deliver. Trusting obedience can be the only response to a gracious and loving God, to the atoning sacrifice of Jesus.

Obedient as to what? As Jesus himself said and enacted countless times, God’s instructions are simple: love God and love one another. Others ought to see this in us. They ought to see “love, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). Do we feed and clothe and care? How? When?

For me, it has always come down to this. I claim to trust Jesus Christ and, as a consequence, that I live in a right relationship with God, that God’s Spirit lives and works in and with and through me. I ought to have something to show for all this. Others should see it.

I live in a covenant relationship with God. God has shown me unimaginable love and I am to live out that love in all my relationships, lifetime and momentary, casual and formal, workplace and home. For in this, John writes, “the love of God has reached perfection.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>There is beauty in the ambiguity here. Does “the love of God” refer to God’s love for us or our love for God. Which has reached perfection (meaning – to bring to completion; to reach its full measure; to lack nothing)? Perhaps both?

# Reading With Heart & Mind

December 31 - January 6

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p><b>Sunday</b> A day for reflection</p>  | <p><b>Monday</b> <b>Genesis 1:1 - 2:4a</b> The first account of creation. You can think of this one as being written from God's perspective. What does it reveal about God, our world, the problem with our world, and the solution?</p> |
| <p><b>Tuesday</b> <b>Genesis 2:4b - 2:25</b> The second creation account, this one from the humans' perspective? What are key emphases found only in this account?</p>   | <p><b>Wednesday</b> <b>Genesis 3</b> The story of the humans' rebellion against God. What is the nature of the rebellion? What is its result? What do we learn about ourselves in this story?</p>  |
| <p><b>Thursday</b> <b>Genesis 4</b> Cain murders his brother. Why? What is the result? Again - what does story tell us about God and about ourselves?</p>  | <p><b>Friday</b> <b>Genesis 6:9-22</b> Why the flood? Why Noah? How does this story make you feel about God?</p>   |
| <p><b>Saturday</b> <b>Genesis 9:1-17</b> In the story of Noah, we are introduced the notion of a covenant between God and humanity. Why a covenant? What does God covenant to do? Are any requirements placed on Noah or humanity?</p> |  |

## Sermon Notes

---

---

---

---

---

### **Make 2007 a year of transformation!**

**The Winter Session of the St. Andrew Academy begins next week – Jan. 7. On-line registration is available now at [www.standrewacademy.org](http://www.standrewacademy.org).**

We've got a great line-up of classes for the winter St. Andrew Academy session. Classes include *The Gospel of John*; *Christianity and World Religions*; a new *Beth Moore Study* on the book of Daniel; *Six Strategies to Great Parenting*; *Discovering God's Will for Your Life*; *Finding Purpose Through Your Spiritual Gifts*; *The Miracles of Jesus*; *The Power of the Prophets*; *Spiritual Man-laws: Discussing Fella-ship in Church*; *Christian Meditation and Movement*; *Experiencing Philippians*; *Transformation: Sounds like a lot of work to me!*, and *A Faith to Live By*.

As you can see, this is one of the most exciting set of classes we've ever offered. We can't find the lives we seek merely by trying, it takes training and learning. Make plans now to join us for one or more of these classes. You'll be glad you did. As always, free childcare is available.

#### **Scott Engle's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.**

Scott's Sunday morning class is open to all adults and offers a growing number of opportunities to meet other members of the St. Andrew community. If you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at [sengle@standrewacademy.org](mailto:sengle@standrewacademy.org).

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In his commentary on today's Scripture passage, D. Moody Smith writes,  
"The Christian message rightly directs itself to human uncertainty and vulnerability . . . and is correctly understood as offering assurance and hope. In 1 John we encounter an important insight about how that assurance, or reassurance, can be attained and authenticated. Not by some spiritual experience or esoteric knowledge is that reassurance given, but by walking in the light as he (God) is in the light or by walking in the same way in which he (Jesus) walked. Neither theological knowledge nor spiritual experience afford valid reassurance apart from walking after Jesus in the light. The images of walking and light have to do with conduct and particularly with human relationships."  
  
From time to time, we all need the reassurance of which Smith speaks. Can doing (loving fully) really lead to the feeling (reassurance)? How? What has been your own experience? How have you sought reassurance of your own faith?
2. The old hymn, "Trust and Obey," gets it right. That is exactly our calling and this is exactly the covenant we have made with God and which we continually need to renew. How do we get out of the trap of thinking that leading an obedient life somehow sets aside God's grace? In other words, how can we strive to be obedient without thinking that we are earning our salvation? You might think about the Exodus. Which came first, the saving of the Hebrew slaves or the giving of the Law?
3. Finally, read again the page two text box, particularly the last paragraph. What do you make of Willard's assertion that we don't become obedient disciples by first striving for obedience, that we need to begin elsewhere? How would you put that in your own words? Do you agree? Do you ever find yourself falling into the rule-making trap each time you hear the word "obedience." Too often, I do!