

Sermon Series: “The HOPE of Christmas”
“Omnipresence”
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In 1966 The Beatles recorded a song about loneliness. In the stanza they sang, “All the lonely people/where do they all come from/all the lonely people/where do they all belong?” The name of the song? “Eleanor Rigby”. It is about lonely people. It is about a elderly woman who looks out the window and picks up the rice from where a wedding has been, and has a funeral no one attends. It also speaks of a priest, Father McKenzie, who works on sermons that no one will hear. In an online article at npr.org (“Most Americans Are Lonely, and Our Workplace Culture May Not Be Helping”; January 23, 2020), from a survey of over 10,000 adult workers in July and August, 2019, it was found that three in five Americans are lonely, “with more and more people reporting feeling like they are left out, poorly understood and lacking companionship”. Interestingly, unlike the song “Eleanor Rigby”, the highest average loneliness score went to Gen Z— those 18-22 years old, with Baby Boomers having the lowest score. What is the solution? A chief medical officer for behavioral health comments in the article, “In-person connections are what really matters. Sharing that time to have a meaningful interaction and a meaningful conversation, to share our lives with others, is important to help us mitigate and minimize loneliness.” That is important. What is left out of this article is another major solution to loneliness, and Christmas addresses this.

CONTEXT: In Isaiah 7:14, King Ahaz of Judah is under a crisis situation. Two nations, Israel and Aram (Syria) are about to attack Judah and take its army to fight off the coming Assyrian Empire's army. Isaiah the prophet comes with words of comfort and hope.

READ Isaiah 7:14. "God promised to Judah's King Ahaz (732-7-16 BC) that the attack he faced with the united forces of King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah of Israel would be overcome, and the sign God gave King Ahaz through Isaiah the prophet was the promise of the birth of Immanuel, 'God with us', to a young woman or virgin. King Ahaz would be delivered by the time this child could be morally conscious. Cf. Matthew 1:22-23, for another child of deliverance! Cf. also 2 Kings 16:1-9." King Ahaz lived in a world that in many ways had similar politics to ours. Nations set us alliances, so that if one was attacked, the other ally or allies would respond and protect the nation. E.g., I am reminded of what is happening currently in the Ukraine. Apparently Russia is on the eastern border of the Ukraine and threatening to invade it. Why? Russia is concerned that the Ukraine will join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO, and become an ally of theirs. Russia stated it would see this as a threat from the West and would invade the Ukraine. This is a similar scenario King Ahaz faced. King Rezin and King Pekah see Assyrian aggressively threatening them with invasion, so they want to make a "NATO" of their own, in a sense, with the King of Judah, King Ahaz, and if he won't become their ally against Assyria they are threatening to replace King Ahaz with their own choice as king and use the troops of Judah to try to stop the Assyrians. Isaiah the prophet enters the picture here, and tells Ahaz not to worry—a child will be born soon who will be called Immanuel, God with us, and by the time he is old enough to eat and tell right from wrong Judah will be delivered from King Rezin and King Pekah. And indeed, King Ahaz of Judah was delivered! The Gospel of Matthew picks up on

this prophecy and sees much more to it, especially since Isaiah 9 and 11 both speak of a David child who will come and deliver Israel. The Gospel of Matthew picks up on this. The angel in Matthew 1 tells Joseph that he will have a son and is to name Him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins. Also, this is to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 that a young woman (עלמה in Hebrew) or virgin (παρθένος in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, the Septuagint) will give birth to a son and he shall be called Immanuel, God with us. This idea of Jesus as “God with us” is central to the good news of the gospel, as Paul brings out

READ Romans 8:37-39. “In Romans, Paul pointed to a wonderful consequence of God’s sending Jesus to die for our sins and rise from the dead— God is so very with us, that nothing can separate us from His love.” In the context Paul asked three questions: (1) if God is for us, who is against us?; (2) who is to condemn us?; and (3) who can separate us from the love of God? It is God who justifies. And what can separate us from the love of God, in v 35— he names hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword— none of which can separate us from God’s love. Paul then quoted from Psalm 44:22, a psalm where the person writing states that he has suffered much for following God, and that for God’s sake we are being killed all day long, counted as sheep to be slaughtered. Paul sees the suffering he has done for the gospel as much like that. Then he returns the theme that nothing can separate us from God’s love. We have a choice this morning— indeed, every day of our lives. This omnipresence of God in His love is something we can read and doubt and ignore because we don’t feel God’s love, or this is something we can read and believe and apply, regardless of what our feelings tell us. This has been very powerful in Christians’ lives over the years, and especially in mine. E.g., when I was in high school I ran track— the 400 in the mile relay and the 800; I would get nervous before races, so

I decided to imagine Jesus running right beside me on the track, and He was, in my mind, wearing a white robe and sandals. I decided to envision this not because I believed in fairy tales, but because, according to places in Scripture like Matthew 1:22-23 and Romans 8, it was true, and this gave me great comfort. E.g., I recall once leaving a social situation— actually, several times from different social situations— where I left feeling bad about something I said, that others did not respect me, that I said something foolish, and as I was driving away I said to myself that I know this is a feeling that can drag me down for days, because it has in the past. Then I sensed the Holy Spirit say, “Or, you can see yourself through My eyes, and believe it, and know you are deeply loved no matter what.” Slowly I decided to believe this, and I still do. E.g., I often wonder how the Church grows in countries like China and Iran, because the Church is so very suppressed there, but it is the love of God that has been poured into peoples’ hearts that make them willing to suffer as they do. They *know* that God is omnipresent with them.

“How does this kind of love give us hope for today?” Wherever we go, and whatever we may face today or in the future, God’s love cannot be separated from you and me. Not even our disobedience and rejection of Him can separate us from His love for us. We do best to apply this in at least two ways. First, we simply choose to believe act on it, like I did in running races in high school. Second, we love others with this love, so they too can know God’s love. Beloved, there are many Eleanor Rigbys out there. It is interesting that Wesley Hill is a New Testament scholar who is a committed Christian, and with a homosexual orientation, and he has chosen to honor God by living a celibate life, and he notes in his book on this that what has helped him is Christian couples and families letting him be a part of their lives, doing things with him, befriending him. How can we do that this Christmas to someone whom we may sense is alone? A

widow? A single person? Someone from another country? Like us, they need this omnipresent person of Jesus who loves us!