

**First Presbyterian Church  
Southampton, New York  
“I Survived the 300!”**

**Philippians 1:3 – 11  
Matthew 11:25 – 30**

**August 28, 2016**

Well, I'll bet at least a few of you have been wondering... what in the world is Pastor Rick's sermon going to be about this morning? What on earth is this mysterious “300” that he's somehow managed to survive... and what the heck does it have to do with us? Hmm... does it mean that I went out and bowled a perfect 300 game last week over at All-Star Lanes in Riverhead? No, my high game is only 256, and that was more than thirty years ago... but I *did* do it using a bowling ball with no finger holes drilled in it! (No, I really did!)

Is “the 300” some kind of cryptic reference to an ancient battle between the Greeks and Persians? Did I secretly take a trip to the pass at Thermopylae, to retrace the steps of brave King Leonidas, who held off the entire Persian army of King Xerxes for nearly a week with just three hundred Spartan warriors? Well, the only Sparta I've ever set foot in is in New Jersey, not Greece. So, no... that's not it either.

Hey, maybe it's got something to do with some new NASCAR race... you know, like the “Hampton Bays 300.” Maybe it's a reference to the average speed of cars traveling on Route 39. Perhaps “the 300” is a new super-burger at Wendy's? Or maybe it's the time it takes to microwave an entire Thanksgiving turkey? Alas, the answer to all those suggestions is no, no, no, and... no!

So, I'll give you a little hint. It's not *me* who's survived the 300... it's *you!* In fact, right now, at this *very* moment, you're in the process of surviving number 300 *right... on... the... nose!* You got it now? You see, this is the *three hundredth sermon* that I've preached as the pastor of First Presbyterian Church (not counting weddings and funerals)... and if you've been around here as long as I have, you've somehow managed to survive them all!

Now, you might be wondering, just how much verbiage *is* three hundred sermons? Well, one of my sermons typically works out to about four single-spaced, typewritten pages... so in the past six and a half years, you've listened to more than twelve hundred pages worth of my preaching! *Twelve hundred pages!* By comparison, *War and Peace* is only 1,156 pages! *David Copperfield* has just 742 pages. The six volumes of C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* is only 1,206 pages. And the New Testament in our pew Bibles has a mere 442 pages! In other words, that's one big bunch of preaching, man! And, to celebrate this historic occasion, I'm going to share a few highlights from each and every one of those three hundred sermons with you this morning! But don't worry... I'll have you out of here by 10:00 p.m. at the latest!

Okay... I'm not *really* going to put you through twelve hours of sermon highlights! But what I *am* going to do with the rest of my preaching time this morning is distil those three hundred sermons down into a small handful of main points... say, three key lessons that I hope you've learned from listening to me drone away up here for more than one hundred hours over the years. If you took all three hundred of my sermons, put them in a theological blender, shook them up real good, and poured it over your head... what are the three most important things that you'd get from it all? Well, here's what I hope we've all gotten:

1) **That Jesus Christ is Lord...** and that trusting Him, and following Him, and loving Him, is the key to a truly meaningful life. I can't think of anything more important to proclaim from this

pulpit, than that. That's the first and ultimate truth that drives everything else we do as individual Christians... and as a Christian church family.

Now, you know as well as I do that we always have the opportunity to bow before many Lords, and to spend our time serving many masters... that we can worship money, or status, or comfort, or sports, or our careers, or a relationship, or any one of a million other eligible options which are just waiting for our devotion and admiration. But we also know that none of those would-be "lords" can *ever* give us what Jesus can give us: forgiveness for our sins; wisdom for dealing with the challenges of life; a sense of purpose that no set of circumstances can ever take away from us; the promise of eternal life, lived in the presence of our Heavenly Father. To place our lives in the loving arms of Christ is to discover what our lives are really all about... and knowing what our lives are really all about is to live life with joy, and with confidence, and with hope, and with the unshakable assurance that who we are and what we do really does matter!

Of course, serving Jesus as Lord gives us no guarantee that we won't have problems, that we won't suffer loss, that we'll always get our way, or that we'll *ever* get our way. Being a Christian disciple is no free pass from the challenging side of life. But what serving Jesus as Lord *does* guarantee us is the absolute certainty of God's invincible love... in good times and in bad. It guarantees us that our God didn't just *make* us, but that's He's also always *with* us... and that always being with us, He will use us to make a real difference in this world. So, that's the first thing that I hope we've all learned, through surviving three hundred sermons! That Jesus Christ is Lord, and that we're called to serve Him, and to love Him.

Which brings us to the second lesson that I hope we've all learned in twelve hundred pages of preaching... and that is:

2) **That the Bible is reliable, and we need to know what the Bible teaches.** Now, this might sound obvious, but we'd better not take it for granted. Because, A) the reliability of the Bible is called into question every single day in our culture, and, B) our general knowledge of that Bible is disappearing faster than the New York Jets' playoff hopes every season... and, believe me, that's pretty fast!

According to our ordination vows, as Presbyterian Christians, we believe that the *"Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal, and God's Word to us."* Which is simply to say that we hold the conviction that, in the Bible, we find everything we need to know in order to establish a relationship with Jesus Christ, and to build a faithful and meaningful life with our Heavenly Father.

The witness of the Scriptures tells us who we are; and why we're here; and how to obey God's will; and what it means to live a life of purpose and meaning. In the Bible we find our spiritual story... and we hear the authoritative and reliable testimony of the people with whom God has directly interacted in order to reveal His purpose and bring about His will.

That's what we believe about the Bible; and, in the words of that famous rock band, Journey, I say, *"don't stop believin'!"* We need to hang on to our convictions about the Bible... because, as I said before, those convictions are challenged every day: by wacko pop-theologies, by popular atheist writers, and by a general societal malaise which thinks that spiritual questions really don't matter.

We live in a culture of disbelief which considers the truth-claims of the Bible to be quaint little vestiges of a bygone era... when people were less enlightened, less educated, and less in touch with their inner being than we are today. According to twenty-first century Western culture, believing the Bible made sense in the eighteenth century... but today, doubt is chic and God is passé, and only the superstitious and intellectually stunted turn to the pages of Scripture for timeless truth and gracious guidance.

Well, as I've been telling you for three hundred sermons now, this is an area where we need to be boldly and unashamedly counter-cultural. Because the Bible is reliable... and the Apostolic witness on which our faith is built not only hasn't been undermined, it's intellectual strength and vitality has never... been... stronger. And we hold that conviction, no matter how many atheist manifestos are on the New York Times bestseller list; no matter how many conspiracy theories suggest that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and that they ran a little deli in a suburb of Paris; and no matter how many people think that the chemists and biologists have answered all the important questions of life.

A nonstop parade of critics and antagonists have been trying to debunk the Bible for two thousand years... and they haven't even made a dent in it. Because the Bible does bring us God's truth... and we are never smarter or wiser than when we acknowledge that truth, and submit ourselves to it.

But that brings me to the second half of this particular lesson... which is that, it's not enough to merely *acknowledge* the truthfulness and reliability of the Bible. We need to *know* what's in that Bible, too. Otherwise, obviously, how is that truth, wisdom, and guidance going to do us any good? The sad fact is that the level of biblical illiteracy within the Christian community has reached nearly epidemic proportions. More and more of us, who vehemently insist that we love the Bible and believe what it says... have less and less knowledge and understanding of what's actually in it, and how it applies to the lives we're out there living every day. And that's a trend that we *must* reverse... because when we lose touch with the biblical witness, we lose touch with the *story* of who we are, and what we stand for, and why it *matters* that we believe, and act, and think the way we do.

We live in an era of "experts" and "specialists," and sometimes I think that we in the church just want to leave the job of knowing the Bible to the pastor and Sunday school teachers... and *they* can parcel out tidbits to us once a week to at least keep us all headed in the right direction. Well, there's no doubt that pastors and teachers have an important role to play... but it doesn't do away with the responsibility that each and every one of us has to know the sacred texts which are the heart and soul of who we are and what we hold dear. Which doesn't mean that we have to understand every last word with crystal clarity... we just need to be familiar with it. In touch with it. On top of it enough to be nourished, and inspired, and challenged by it.

So, if you think you don't know the Bible very well, start reading that baby! Read a gospel, read some Psalms, read some Old Testament, some New Testament, anything, any part, whenever you can work it in to your schedule. Don't worry if you don't get it all, if there are parts that you don't understand. You'll understand *some* of it! And whatever you *do* get out of the effort will help your faith... and make your life with the Lord that much better! So, that's the second thing I hope we've all learned... through surviving three hundred sermons! That the Bible is reliable, and that we need to know what the Bible teaches.

Which brings me to the third and final lesson that I hope we've learned after six and a half years of sermonic serenading... and that is:

3) **That it's not all about me.** And what I mean by that is that the Christian life isn't "me centered..." the Christian life is "God centered." The life we live as followers of Jesus isn't so much about doing "my thing," as it is discovering "God's thing," and then doing our best to do *that*.

And this, of course, is such an important truth to keep in mind... since we live today in the golden age of narcissism, self-indulgence, and having my way at all costs. There's hardly any aspect of society where this self-gratifying attitude hasn't made itself felt... even, sadly, in the churches. And one of the most important things that we can do as Christian disciples is to resist that "me first" mentality... and point our focus back where it belongs, on Jesus Christ and His will for our lives.

Now, obviously, it's natural and normal for us to be concerned about ourselves and our families... and of course that's not always a bad thing, many times it's a very good and necessary thing. Our faith just reminds us that our concern can't stop there, with ourselves... but that it must extend to our neighbor, and, most importantly, to our Lord, who may have plans for us that go beyond our own self-satisfaction. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed to His Father, "Not my will be done, by thy will..." and that should be the daily prayer of each and every one of us. And life becomes the quest to live out God's answer to that prayer, to the very best of our ability.

So, there you go... three key lessons, gleaned from three *hundred* sermons: ***Jesus Christ is Lord... the Bible is reliable, and we need to know it... and it's not all about me.*** Now, in my *next* three hundred sermons, you're going to hear those same three lessons... and hopefully many others, of varying degrees of importance!

But for today, and in the week that's ahead, let's do our best to hold these great truths in our hearts... and put them into action in our lives. And as we do, be assured that our faith and our discipleship will grow! That's our Lord's promise... and the hope on which we stand! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit... amen!