

The Three-Armed Embrace of God
By Larry Augsburger
Luke 2:22-40
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- I. One of the greatest things about being a parent is all the hugs you get to give and receive.
 - A. At least that's the way I felt about being a parent.
 1. I just loved to hold and hug our daughters when they were little.
 2. And I haven't outgrown it yet even though they're not little any more.
 3. And that's one of the great things about getting together for Christmas—or any other time, for that matter—we always begin and end our visit with a hug—a hug of hello and welcome, and a hug of good-bye, take care because I love you.
 - B. And it is this element of God—the hugging part of God—The Embracing Face of God—that we want to look at here on this Sunday after Christmas.
- II. Now I want to begin by noticing all the embracing going on in today's scripture.
 - A. First there are the embracing arms of the young, proud, bewildered, scared neophyte parents as they bring their child to the temple.
 1. I've been there and done that.
 - a. Holding that precious bundle awkwardly, stiffly—fearful lest I drop her or fail to support her head adequately or break her in some way.
 - b. Yet knowing it would take a tow truck and two come alongs to drag that baby from my grasp.
 2. These were young, strong, eager, even if inexperienced, embracing arms.
 - B. And then there are the embracing arms of Simeon who holds the baby as he says, *"Sovereign Lord, you (can) now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."*
 - C. Simeon's embracing arms are followed by the embracing arms of Anna who *gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.*
 - D. The wonder that had begun there in the stable—as we celebrated it on Christmas Eve—carried over to the temple at this time of purification forty days later.
 - E. Simeon and Anna and Mary and Joseph—people who understood the importance of Jesus—were anxious to embrace him, to hold him, to celebrate him.
 - F. But to dwell too much on their embracing the baby—to dwell too much on Jesus's infancy at all—is to get things wrong because the important thing about the birth of Jesus is not that people get to embrace God, it's that God embraces us.
 1. We already see this embrace in Simeon's comments.
 2. Simeon says something quite radical about the embracing face of God when

he refers to the salvation Jesus will bring as being for *...All people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.*

- a. Now no Jew had any problem with the last part of what Simeon said—*a light for glory to your people Israel.*
 - (1) Of course God's salvation would be for the glory of Israel.
 - (2) After all, the Jews were God's chosen people.
- b. But the corollary of the Jews being God's chosen people was that the Gentiles were not God's chosen people and had no part in what God was going to do.
- c. So it is in contradiction to that that Simeon says:
 - (1) This salvation is...*For all people.*
 - (2) This salvation is *...A light for revelation to the Gentiles.*
- d. God, in sending Jesus, was embracing not only his chosen people, Israel, but all people, including the Gentiles.

G. And that is the point of this first worship service after Christmas—that God has embraced us.

III. In the birth of Jesus, God wrapped his arms around the whole human race.

A. Paul discusses what the embrace of God meant for the Jews in *Galatians 4*, *But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons (and daughters). Because you are sons (and daughters), God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but a son (or a daughter); and since you are a son (or a daughter), God has made you also an heir.*

B. And then Paul outlines what the embrace of God means for all people when he says in Romans 8, writing to both Jews and Gentiles, *Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons (and daughters) of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ in order that we may share in his glory.*

1. This idea of being children of God raises an interesting image that I want to

illustrate by looking at it from a reverse perspective.

- a. Did you ever have a kid in your class who wore nicer clothes than everyone else, was taken on exotic vacations, got a new car on his or her 16th birthday and didn't sweat college costs or washing dishes in the cafeteria, cause Dad could just write a check in full?
 - b. I suspect we've all had that experience of having one or more of our classmates be of privileged status and of vacillating between envying them and resenting what they had that we didn't.
 - c. They haven't done anything to deserve that status. They're no better than we are, but they have that special status just because of who their parents are.
2. Well, we are one of those kids—one of those kids with privileged status.
 - a. And just like them, we don't deserve that status. We haven't earned it. We can't earn it.
 - b. But God conveys it on us just the same.
 - c. It's based on who he is as the loving parent, not who we are as the undeserving child.

C. We are children of the king, and we are heir to an incredible degree of privilege.

IV. There are many ways of defining this undeserved privileged status, but today I want to think of it as a three-armed embrace of God.

A. Now actually to speak of a three-armed embrace of God is rather arbitrary.

1. God has an unlimited number of arms.
2. His embrace is multi-armed, beyond our capacity to even imagine.
3. But today we're going to look at three of the leading arms of his embrace.

B. The first arm of God's embrace is love.

1. Now I know we talk about love a lot, but I don't think we realize that our concept of love has been crippled by a deficient understanding of love—something I'm going to call the accounting model of love.
 - a. We think of love as something we either give or receive.
 - (1) I love my wife and daughters.
 - (2) And I am loved by my wife and daughters.
 - b. Theologically, the way we talk about love is that we have been loved by God which makes a huge deposit in our love account and enables us to be extravagant in our love for other people.
 - (1) And here we think not only of people who love us back.
 - (2) But we think of people who don't love us back—in fact we think especially of people who don't love us back.
 - (3) God's deposit of love in our account is so great that we can afford to love even our enemies.
 - c. In this accounting model we think of love in terms of love incoming and love outgoing or accounts receivable and accounts payable.
 - d. But I would like us to move beyond this accounting model in which we keep track of what has been received and what is owed.
2. Rather I think it's more realistic to think of the love arm of the embrace of God as an atmosphere of love in which we marinate, absorbing and being

penetrated by the flavor of love which permeates every part of us.

- a. Psychological experiments illustrate the unconscious ways in which people are shaped by the atmosphere around them.
 - (1) Experimenters do things like showing one group a violent film and the other a film with a significant act of kindness and then putting them in a stressful situation.
 - (2) Invariably a large number of those who saw the violent film will respond in a violent way while a large number of those who saw the kinder film will respond kindly.
 - (3) The atmosphere in which we live significantly shapes the ways we act and react.
 - b. And the atmosphere of God is love, permeating and penetrating deeply into our inner being.
3. God loves us extravagantly. He wraps his embracing arm of love around us.
 - a. John points out, *How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!*
 - b. Paul points out in Ephesians 2, *But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ.*
 4. The first arm of God's embrace is wild, extravagant love.
- C. The second arm of the embrace of God is peace.
1. Again we're talking about an atmosphere in which we marinate and are permeated with a particular flavor.
 2. Isaiah does such a beautiful job of illustrating this atmosphere as he says in *Isaiah 11, The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.*
 3. There is a number of places where Jesus talks about his embrace of peace.
 - a. In John 14 he says, *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.*

control.

- V. The three-armed embrace of God creates an atmosphere in which we are permeated by God's love, peace and joy which serves as a blessing to us and in turn motivates us to become a blessing to others.
- A. I want us to close by singing three Christmas carols that particularly celebrate these elements of the embrace of God, Love Came Down at Christmas, It Came Upon a Midnight Clear, and Joy to the World.
- B. Now love and joy are featured prominently in the first and third carol, so there's no need for comment on them.
- C. But I want us to especially notice the message of peace in It Came Upon a Midnight Clear. Open your books to 195.
1. This carol was written in the late 1840s, a period of history that was filled with revolution in Europe and the Mexican-American War in America, and in which its writer, Edmund Sears, struggling with depression, longed for some sense of peace and tranquility.
 2. And that longing is graphically expressed in the text.
 3. In v. 1 the "glorious song of old" was the message of peace.
 4. Vv. 2 and 3 urge the world to hush the noise of war and strife in order to be able to hear the angel's song of peace.
 5. V. 4 invites us as individuals to rest and hear the song of peace.
 - a. His depression clearly speaks through in this verse.
 - b. He addresses, "You, beneath life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low, who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow" and assures them, "Look now! For glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing."
 6. And v. 5 says that we will soon experience "the age of gold when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling, and the whole world send back the song (the song of peace) which now the angels sing."
- D. Let's stand as we sing these three carols rejoicing in the three-armed embrace of God.