

# “I Am With You Always”

Matthew 28:16-20

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Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Well, here it is, the final sermon of the longest retirement in human history. I wouldn't blame the wonderful members of this congregation if they felt like the Psalmist who asked, “How long, O Lord, how long?” You have been incredibly gracious to my family and me these past 16 years and nine months—the same length of time it took me to begin kindergarten and graduate from college. The love and gratitude I feel for you is beyond description.

This is the final of a three-part series on “Benedictory Addresses.” We've talked about the final words of Moses in Deuteronomy: “Choose life that you and your descendants may live”; of Paul in II Timothy: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith;” and, today, the final words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew: “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

In today's scripture, the eleven surviving apostles gather on the mountain where Jesus had once been transfigured. The scripture says the apostles worshiped him, but some of them doubted. Who were the doubters? We don't know. Faith is not a matter of virtue, or lack thereof. It is a matter of grace.

That said, they were all there in the divine presence. And if Jesus' resurrection appearance on that mountain didn't all quell their doubts, his spiritual presence among them as they began their ministry to the world would have.

We've talked before about the distinction between disciples and apostles. A disciple is someone who follows. Jesus had many disciples, many followers. An apostle is a disciple who is commissioned to go forth in Jesus' name. A disciple follows; an apostle is sent. To the eleven surviving apostles—Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus, had come to a tragic end—Jesus gave what has been called the Great Commission:

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

*Is that all, Lord?*

There are no easy jobs in the service of Jesus Christ. There are only necessary jobs that require a great deal of grace in order to be fulfilled. The entry point in the high vocation of discipleship is baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Then the education begins, as we learn what the Lord has commanded. We don't get to graduate until we finish our earthly life and, by God's grace, hear the most blessed of benedictions: "Well done, good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of our Master." The physical sign of the covenant between God and the Israelites was a surgical procedure known as circumcision. The sign of the covenant between Christ and those who would be his disciples is baptism. Baptism leaves no physical scars, but its purpose is to help transfigure the spirit.

It has been a great joy for me to have presided over baptisms my final three Sundays here. Two weeks ago, when I was having coffee with Alan Freeman and we were talking about his upcoming baptism, I related a scene from a strange and moving book called “All Hallows Eve” by Charles Williams, an English writer who, in the 1930’s and ’40’s, wrote what was called “spiritual thrillers.” Williams was part of a group known as “The Inklings,” a group of Christian writers at Oxford whose members included C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of “The Lord of the Rings.” In Williams’ novel, “All Hallows Eve,” members of a cult that practices black magic have adopted a little girl whom they intend to dedicate to Satan the first Halloween after she comes of age. They keep her away from church, and all known Christians, but they also inadvertently hire a nursemaid who is a quiet Christian and who secretly baptizes the child at a lake called the Serpentine in London’s Hyde Park. In Catholicism and Anglicanism, baptism is a sacrament that can be performed by any baptized Christian if a priest is not present. The cultists didn’t know that; but neither did the nursemaid know that they were members of a cult. All she knew was that the child in her charge had no one else to introduce her to Christ. So the nursemaid secretly baptized the little girl “In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,” and then ever after prayed for her. When the girl grew a little older, the nursemaid was discharged, but continued to pray for her. As the girl grew up, she felt profoundly different from the adults all around her—set apart, in ways she could not fully understand. At the climax of the novel, when the cultists began the ceremony of offering her to Satan, she suddenly felt rough wood at her

back and rain upon her face. The rough wood was the cross of Jesus Christ. The rain was the water of her baptism. They could not give her to the devil because she already belonged to the Lord Jesus Christ.

How often in the course of our own Christian pilgrimage have we needed—whether we felt it or not—that rough wood at our backs and that rain upon our faces?

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My oldest friend is Joe Matthews. We've known each other since third grade. Joe has lived in Brazil for over 40 years, but we still stay in touch. He's a very devout Christian, and is a far more faithful correspondent and friend than I am. He always remembers my birthday, and I tend to remember his three months after it has passed and resolve to do better for his next one (my forgetfulness about the date of his birthday is particularly noteworthy because it's always the day after Christmas). For my birthday e-mail this year, Joe summoned a memory that I would have been happy to leave dormant.



*Buffalo Bob Smith and Howdy Doody*

One Saturday morning in September, 1960, when I was in 4th grade, my sister Linda and I happened to be watching the very last episode of “The Howdy Doody Show.” The series began in 1947, which means you have to be pretty old to remember it. It featured a puppet named Howdy Doody, a host called Buffalo Bob and various characters like Clarabell the Clown and Phineas T. Bluster. In one of the earliest photographs of my childhood, I’m holding a Howdy Doody puppet. It was my Christmas present when I was three. I recently learned that one like it cost around \$3.45 in 1954; in 1995, one like it in excellent condition sold for \$23,000 at an auction. Mine was probably left at the curb in a spring housecleaning.

Anyway, by the time I was nine, I had long since stopped watching Howdy Doody. By that time, my pre-adolescent self was fixated on a stunning blonde who swung from trees and had a chimpanzee as a best friend. Her name was “Sheena, Queen of the Jungle.” How many of you remember Sheena? *Of course, it’s always the old guys.* My sister had a crush on “Circus Boy,” played by Mickey Dolenz, who was later one of the Monkees. “Sheena” and “Circus Boy” ran at the same time on Saturday morning and we only had one TV. That caused some sibling conflict, which our mother resolved by saying we would have to take turns. Linda could watch her stupid circus show one Saturday and I could watch my masterpiece of the filmmaker’s art the next. But that particular Saturday morning in September, we happened to be watching “Howdy Doody” because it was the very last episode ever and therefore an occasion of some historic interest. The reason I mention all of this is because at the end, when the show ended, Clarabell the Clown, who had never uttered a

solitary word, looked into the camera and whispered “Bye, kids.” As soon as he said the words, I burst into tears. Joe Matthews happened to show up at our house at that precise moment. He couldn’t wait to tell our 4th grade classmates in Mrs. Robertson’s class the following Monday during Show and Tell. They all thought it was hilarious. I was the kid who cried because “Howdy Doody” went off the air. It was my first, but far from my last, great social mortification, and went a long way for preparing me for the roast my former future pallbearers gave me a few weeks ago.

I bring all this up because this is what Joe Matthews wrote in this year’s birthday letter e-mail:

Dear David,

I have known you now getting on to almost six decades (58 years – as of this week – to be exact). First of all – before I get into the subject above, I want to wish you a happy 66<sup>th</sup> birthday, one day in advance. May you have many healthy and happy ones to enjoy down the road, my good friend.

You know, from time to time I ponder upon the fact as to why you were so distraught when the Howdy Doody Show (HD for short) ended that Saturday afternoon on September 24, 1960. We had met each other a year previous when we began the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade together in Mrs. Smith’s class in 1959 when [Francis] Mallory [Elementary School] opened its doors for the first time. We were now beginning the 4<sup>th</sup> grade together in Mrs. Robertson’s class. I went over to your house that afternoon to hang out but Mr. Hartman asked me to wait outside for a while as you were having a tough time with the HD show ending. In fact, when you did come out – it was evident that you were quite upset and I remembered what your dad had said to me - so I kept it to myself.

*No, he didn’t keep it to himself—he couldn’t wait to tell Mrs. Robertson’s class! But I digress. Joey went on:*

Over all these years, I could not figure out what the big deal was about HD. I had seen a couple of episodes – but nothing beyond that. I was neither a critic nor a big fan – kind of neutral you could say. This “mystery” has baffled me over all these years. Until a couple of months ago . . . .

One Saturday afternoon in June, here at home, I had some time on my hands and I was surfing the internet (YouTube) looking at some old shows I used to watch back in the day such as “Rin Tin Tin”, Cheyenne, Twilight Zone, just to mention a few. In the right hand column – YouTube has related material – and one of the options was a recap of the first and last HD shows. I was curious – so I clicked on it. I was amazed to see that the first show aired back in the late 1940s. Anyway – the clip was about 45 minutes long and I thought I would take in just a couple of minutes and move on to something else. What happened was I wound up watching the whole thing. I thought Buffalo Bob Smith, as the spokesman for the show, and Lew Anderson in his supporting role of the mute clown, Clarabell, were terrific!

I was taken aback about how good the acting was – which was all live (no video tape at that time), no script, all adlibbed, and the acting and theme development were right on the mark and very well done. I was really touched when the show got to those last few minutes when Buffalo Bob gently addresses all the marionettes, one-by-one, as they slowly parade by and they tenderly say goodbye to the kids in the audience. Finally, comes the mute clown Clarabell who puts his face right up to the camera and tearfully hushes two simple words: “*bye kids*”. Then the screen fades to black. ***Man - I was a complete wreck!*** I did not see that coming. Caught me completely from the blind side. Lew Anderson did that last scene - not only masterfully – but you could tell he meant it and he was also a wreck.

I can now see how all the kids in “Howdy Doody Land” (including DBH, Jr.) were so impacted on that late September afternoon back in 1960. Pity it took me the better part of 57 years to catch up with the rest of you guys.

I was blown away. It took 58 years, but Joey got it. Some things take a long time to get resolved.

I wrote Joey back and told him that I was really moved by the acuity of his memory and grateful for his friendship. I told him that I thought I must have been an emotional snowflake then that my response was a sign of emotional immaturity, and that guys like him had stronger emotional reserves. But now I think that that early experience had a redemptive quality, in that it foreshadowed all that came later. Childhood is when we start to learn that things which once seemed so stable—my dog will live forever, my Mom and Dad will be together forever, we will be Best Friends Forever—really aren't. At every high school or family reunion, we learn that we cannot step in the same river twice.

As the Psalmist says:

Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.  
Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.  
For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night....we spend our years as a tale that is told.  
The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.  
So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.  
[Psalm 90].

But yet, as deeply affecting as Clarabell's benedictory "Bye, kids" was, it wasn't really the end. How could it have been the end if 67 year old Joe Matthews was watching it 57 years later and became as deeply affected as I had been when I was nine? Perhaps nothing truly important is ever lost. My great professor and spiritual mentor, Sheldon Vanauken, was brought to Christ by C.S. Lewis when he and his wife were at Oxford. Once, on Oxford High

Street, Van called out to Lewis, “Good-bye!” Lewis turned and shouted back, “Christians NEVER say goodbye!”

I retire with the deepest gratitude for you and all of your kindness. It is source of amazement to me that you have put up with me for as long as you have. I leave with the knowledge that Renee will be an outstanding Acting Senior Minister and that this church has devoted staff members who are loving, faithful and good. I also leave with the knowledge that there are many outstanding lay leaders in our church family and that in a couple of weeks your new Directors of Youth Ministries and Children’s Ministries will begin their duties. As I’ve said again and again, I feel like I’m getting a promotion as I move from the pulpit to the pew, and that the best years in our church’s storied history are yet to come. Most of all, I take great consolation in knowing that God can be with each of us, wherever we are, and that God’s love encompasses heaven and earth. Jesus’ final words to his disciples before he ascended to heaven were, “I am with you always to the end of the age.” And so he is. First, last and always, our Lord Jesus Christ is with us to the end of the age.



*Photo by Mike Wilson*

One final thing. The last three bulletin covers have featured images of our church’s steeple with its towering spire surmounted by a cross. A spire, which points to the heavens, shares the same linguistic root as the words “spirit,” “inspire” and “aspiration”—the divine grace of God leading us to greater heights and nobler vistas. Today’s image, taken by Mike Wilson’s drone, looks beyond our spire to the college across the street and to the horizon beyond. And there, above the bank of clouds, framed by the blue sky, rises the cross of Jesus Christ. That steeple, that spire and most of all that cross have become the iconic symbols of First Christian Church. I thank God for this church and I thank God for you. Most of all, I thank God for Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who is with us always to the end of the age.

*Bye, kids....*

Oh, who am I kidding? Christians NEVER say good-bye!

Amen.