

LOVE

TEXT: Isaiah 7:10-16

There was a very popular movie a number of years ago called “Love Story”. The sub-title was “Love means you never have to say *I’m sorry*”. I have always believed that this is a false supposition. Love means you often say “I’m sorry”. It means you accept all others as your brothers and sisters in the family of God. Love even means that you get out of your comfort zone for others in need, even if it is not convenient.

If we were to sum up the story of Christmas it would come out to “Love”. God’s love for us is central to Christmas. Consider the manger; God’s love in a manger, God humbled himself to become as one of us. Christian author Max Lucado put it this way: “The God of the universe was born into the poverty of a peasant and spent his first night in the cow’s feed trough. The God of the universe left the glory of heaven and moved into our neighborhood.”

Lucado also tells a modern story of love as he compares God’s gift with a gift the famous musician Billy Joel once gave his daughter. On her 12th birthday she was in New York City, and the musician was in Los Angeles. He phoned her that morning apologizing for his absence, but told her to expect the delivery of a large package before the end of the day. The daughter answered the doorbell that evening to find a seven-foot-tall, brightly wrapped box. She tore it open, and out stepped her father, fresh off the plane from the West Coast. Can you imagine her surprise?

Perhaps you can. Our greatest gift came in the flesh too. Jesus Christ, born as a baby so long ago. The greatest gift of all. The gift of the Father’s love.

When we begin to realize the greatness of this gift, we fall in love with God. This is what happened to Mary. Her response to God’s graciousness is found in her words responding to the angel’s announcement to her – words of love and acceptance of the miracle that was to come. Her Magnificat is a song of praise, a song of love. Mary

received God's gift, and in response she poured out her praise to him. And this praise is not just, "God, I love you". It's full of great wisdom and insight.

But also consider Joseph, the unsung hero of Advent. He had every right to put Mary away, to disgrace her publicly, and even have her stoned. Yet, his concern for Mary and her future showed his heart of compassion and love. Despite what was seemingly impossible, Joseph trusted the words of the angel of the Lord and, by faith, obeyed. Jesus was shaped in his earthly manhood by his earthly father, just as we are. He learned a skill and a craft from hours at the feet of Joseph. He saw faith and sacrifice lived out through a simple, faithful builder, who loved God and loved him.

At Christmas time, if we are going to be a part of this Christmas story we are called to make the hard choice to love. I don't use that phrase "hard choice" lightly. I use it because loving this world, and loving one another, requires something from us. It requires us to invest in others; it requires us to give of ourselves. And, most of all, love requires us to be willing to be changed.

I started by talking about a movie about love. There are many Christmas movies that have become part of our culture over the years. I recently re-watched "A Christmas Carol" (the Muppet's version). And once again I heard the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, and how he was transformed from a grumpy, hardhearted miser to a generous and loving man.

Then I remembered other Christmas shows. Charlie Brown finds meaning with his sad little Christmas tree despite the fact the whole world has gone commercial, and no one understands what Christmas is really about anymore. And if you've ever seen National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation, in the end we find Clark Griswold, who just wanted a perfect Christmas, finds the love of his family despite the fact that just about everything has gone wrong.

If we are really serious about Advent, if we're really serious about preparing our hearts for the coming of Christ, if we are truly using this season to focus on what is coming, there is no way that we won't be changed by it. Maybe we won't have a big, miraculous, carol-filled Christmas morning, but inside our hearts, if you listen closely, you'll hear the change happening and the love filling us.

And as powerful as that love is inside of us, it's even more powerful when we share it. What if in the face of all that we find troubling with the world, we showed the world what God's love really means? What if we showed how powerful it could be? This time of year, no matter what is happening around us, we are called to prepare our hearts to love anyway. We're asked to open them up and to get ready to welcome Christ into the world. But more than that, we are called to love the world.

So, as we prepare for Christmas Eve just a few days from now, here's the big question: What is your script going to say? And my hope is that your script too is going to be full of the words and actions of one who wants to magnify God, and to live out Christmas. My hope is that it will be one of a person who has been transformed by the love of God, and who now wants to love the world because of God.

Of all the books, movies, television shows about Christmas, perhaps the best known and loved is Clement Moore's *A Visit From St. Nicholas*", better known as "*The Night Before Christmas*". I will end today with a new version written by Pastor Kelly Theibault of the First Congregational Church of North Attleboro, Massachusetts. It goes like this:

'Twas the season of Advent, and whispers abound,
For everyone knew Santa was coming to town.
The kids tried so hard to be extra good,
And did all the things that they knew that they should.

They cleaned up their rooms. They said "Thank you!" and "Please!"
And they even ate all of their carrots and peas.
But there were others in town whose actions weren't great;
Instead they stole packages and spread words of hate.

So, at that little church in Oldtown, they met
To light a candle in hopes of lessening the threat.
The candle they lit was the candle of love
That carried with it a story from above.

The scripture that day told the story of two
That would become three before the story was through.
The story had angels, and shepherds, and kings,
And it told of all kinds of unexpected things:

A young girl with child, who was not married yet,
And her finacee, who was beginning to fret.
But an angel came to quell their fears
And assured them that, for many years,

The prophets had promised a chosen one
Whose life, through them, was about to come.
So, instead of reacting with anger and fear,
They praised God, for the message was clear

That even though life doesn't go as you plan
You should still love others as much as you can.
'Cause the choice is ours to love or to hate,
Though some believe it's all about fate.

But I believe goodness comes when goodness we share,
And love is the gift that we give when we care.
But, back to the story again for a minute,
So that we can remember how to begin it.

A story of a baby, a mom, and a dad,
And the difficult journey that they all had.
But were they filled with anger? Did they curse and shout
In reaction to all that was coming about?

No, they listened to God, and they followed God's call,
Which led them to a manger stall.
What a strange place for a king to be born,
Which is just what happened on that Christmas morn.

But this king was different, with no judgment or greed.
Instead, he spent his life planting seed,
And teaching the people to love and to care,
Never to hurt others, and always to share.

Watch out for the widow, and the poor, and the weak
For they are all blessed, including the meek.
But the most important lesson he taught
Goes back to the candle of love, we almost forgot!

The little baby that was born in the hay
Would teach the world an important lesson one day,
To love the Lord with all your heart
And loving our neighbor are the best ways to start.

So, brothers and sisters in Christ, if you're able,
Please talk about love at your Christmas table.
Encourage each other to do what is right,
To love your neighbor, and never to fight.

Let's brighten our corner of the world if we can,
By carrying the candle of love in our hand,
And sharing the story of the mother and dad,
And the little baby boy that they had.

Sure, there were presents given by kings that day,
Just like the presents Santa brings our way.
But let's not just be good that we might get a gift.
Instead, let's work for a societal shift.

That hate might cease and love might abound,
That's something I pray that this Christmas will be found.
As we finish this rhyme, may it be so!
And thanks be to God from the people below.

May your Christmas be merry, and your new year be bright,
And may you love your neighbor with all of your might.
With a heartfelt wish for good will to all men,
Let us finish this story with a joy-filled, "Amen!"