

“Love”

Isaiah 63:7-9, 15-16;
Romans 8:31-39; John 3:16-21

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We are about as deep into Advent as we get. We're into the coming of Jesus, the coming of God to be among us. Throughout Advent, we have looked at these words that we think about as a kind of preparation or way forward into greeting Jesus. In doing that, we recognize that they are also words that God has *invited us into*. As we've gone along, we've talked about *hope* as a confidence of a good that is before us. That confidence comes from a particular place: it comes from a God who loves us.

We've talked about *peace* as a way of living, a way of being, something that we can look at and move toward because we have a God that gives us that vision and invites us to go there.

We've looked at *joy* as something we draw out of the wells of salvation, out of the healing that God does in our lives. Again, it feels like it's based in the gift that God gives us, of grace and love.

We've also recognized as we've gone along that the world around us doesn't always inspire these same feelings. There's a particular way in which the world today seems to inspire something different.

And I don't know, maybe it's that some level of change always can be disconcerting. You know, even change in trends can be disconcerting. I might wear one thing in one time period, and then find that if I keep wearing it across the course of my life, people will think I'm a little strange! Fashion has gone from plaids, to preppies, to grunge, and there are all kinds of trends. But it is disconcerting. Change is always a little disconcerting.

Sometimes we see changes that don't seem to be quite so innocuous – changes that we wonder about, that seem to have some darkness within them. I have to admit / struggle with the reality that fewer and fewer people hold a faith in which God seems to be important, and I wonder if that reflects some kind of darkness in our world. Certainly, the visions and struggles we have today feel like a moment of darkness. Questions about what is real and what is not, questions about truth and whether it's even important anymore, feel like a darkness that seems to creep over us. And then there are things we can be concerned about such as climate change, our prejudices, and the way we are treating one another in places like the border. There is a darkness that brings great trepidation for me, and worry and anxiety in the midst of a time I want to be helpful. The trouble is that it doesn't quite stop just with that anxiety. There are moments of real hatred expressed and moments of real violence evident. We can get to a place of incredible fear of the perils of the day.

That's why when we hear in John that God so loved the world that he sent his only son that we might be saved, there's something incredibly powerful in that. A God that's

paying attention and cares about God's people, cares about creation and all of life in it. When we talk about the reason for the season, we say it's Jesus. Well, yes, but there's also a reason for Jesus. I mean it feels like the real reason for it all is that God so loved the world. Jesus is an expression of that. He is God come to be with us to show the fullness of God's grace. God cares in the midst of all the strife. God wants to bring us to a place of safety. That idea of saving is – well, the Greek word really means to bring to a place of safety, to bring us to life.

As I was thinking about how it is the love of God that is really the reason – of pretty much everything -- for the season as well, and I was looking for an image to represent the love of God, I kept seeing all these nice pictures. You know, we have a tendency to take the good and make it so sweet, so wonderful, that it begins to feel unreal. But for me, the love of God is real and is present in the nitty gritty of life. It's not just a pretty ornament on the tree. It is what gets me through, one day to the next. It is when God sent God's son to be among us. God so loved the world that he sent Jesus, sent his son so that we might be saved, and we may not perish but have eternal life.

Now I want to talk about that a little bit. When we think about eternal life, we tend to think about life everlasting. I think it would be better to talk about that in terms of *resurrection* rather than this word that we translate as *eternal*. Because the word *eternal* really is a word that does have a sense of timelessness to it. It's basically about an age, but it's about the character and quality of that age. So when it's saying he wants to give us eternal life, it's this timeless quality and character that he wants to give us. God comes into this world not just so we can just leave and go to the next world. That is a wonderful thing. But God comes into the world so that we might have a particular quality and character of life.

It begins because God so loved the world. That love is not just that God had nice feelings for us. Sometimes I think that's what we think of when we say God loved the world, that he had nice feelings for us. No. There's the sense in which God cared so much for you and me that he wants to come into our lives and be part of them. He wants to engage us, to encourage us, to show us the way, and to give us life. He doesn't just have nice feelings.

And perhaps there is something about love. It's not just how we feel, it's how it acts. It is how it enters into the cracks and crevices of our lives and changes who we are. Paul is convinced that the love is so deep that there is nothing that can get between us and the love of God. All the things we fear – the perils of life – NOTHING can get between us and the love of God.

I can't have a Christmas sermon without "It's a Wonderful Life," because it is about the quality and character of life of an age and a time. This movie tries to point out that there is something about the quality and character of a person's life that matters. God enters in and makes sure that that quality and character has the chance to express itself. Know what the angel does? It continues to allow that quality and character to be expressed.

And so, as we begin to think about how this season leads through, is infused by, and is undergirded by this idea of God's love, and we recognize that God comes to be among us, we need to take note of how God does that. As a child, as a baby, as one who enters in in a way that he can grow up among us unnoticed, almost. And then, as he is noticed, he invites us to serve, recognizing he came to serve, not to be served. There's a way in which God's love continues to undergird all of what God invites us into.

It is the quality and character of life, and sometimes we use the fruits of the spirit to illustrate that. In moving through Advent, you couldn't talk about hope without talking about the love of God that made it possible. You can't go through and talk about peace without recognizing it's the love of God that invites us into a way of being and creates a caring community, which is love at work. You can't draw joy from the wells of salvation without recognizing that it's because we are loved that we can do that. It is indeed the sense of *being* loved that allows us to look outward, to trust, to have an openness to life itself.

It's easy to talk about love, and to talk about it in these kinds of glowing terms, or to even immortalize it in a movie. But really, the love of God is present in real people, in real life. So think of how we live our lives. I think oftentimes we think about love in relationship to how we live one with another, our day to day interactions, the way we are nice to one another. Yet love goes beyond that. Sure, it is about how we as individuals live and care for one another. This kind of love means choosing to value and care for others, particularly because they are people of God. We do that individually and in person.

But we don't stop using this when we think about larger situations. We don't quit using love or the idea we care for all people when we start thinking about how a community works, or how a county should work, or a nation should work, or how the world should work. It feels to me sometimes that we can do great at trying to be persons that care for the person in front of us, but not always about the person who's different from us somewhere else. It also suggests to me a way of dealing with our problems. Rather than deny them or be in despair about them, or even try to destroy them, which I think is another thing we try to do sometimes, it invites us instead to see how we can heal them, how we can handle them, where the help can be. It means taking complex, thorny issues seriously and trying to work them out. Caring about the *people* who are involved, who are affected – not just the economics, but the *people*. Not caring more about power than about people. Not caring more about what I get than what is given.

I believe the love of God is translated into real life and the way we live it, the way we deal with each other, the way we deal as a people together. It's the way groups deal with each other, and it's all because of the love of God. A God who so loved the world that he gave his only son so that we may not perish, but have eternal life – a quality and character that's timeless and everlasting, that we can begin to live into now because of the love of God. The angels announced it, and we can celebrate! Amen.