

## Advent Week 4 – Dec. 19/20 **We need Love to See the Full Picture (and we need love to show it too)**

Advent (four weeks to prepare us for the arrival/coming) has us in a rhythm of anticipation and celebration of Immanuel (God with us), and what that reality feels like.

(In the words of Lennon, Ono) So this is Advent, and what have we done...

We have dwelled on Hope, Peace, Joy as heartbeats of anticipation as we slowed down to focus for a moment on the one thing that matters. Longing for Jesus and His kingdom. We need rhythm and these solid places to put our feet.

- **Hope** – Not wishing but telling us there is one who is there... seeing where we will place our focus. Jesus gives REAL HOPE. Let our hope get active...
- **Peace** – Uncertainty and waiting, We can have peace while we're in process. That the promise of peace may rule in our hearts
- **Joy** - Joy is the greater happiness (eclipsing the lesser trial), Joy is directly tied to the level of hope you have – Joyful spirit practical in its reality

**Love** – It's here our heartbeat increases, beating faster as the arrival comes... it's here we encounter our God and others in meaningful ways. Love appropriately completes the frame so we can see the fullest picture of God's love in Jesus. *We are equipped to love because He first loved us*. We seek to love God with all our heart, soul and strength and we live a life of love for others.

I want you to walk with me for about 30 minutes and see the rhythm of Love across the Christmas story:

We should remember Christmas identifies two births. We focus on the greatest one naturally but one prepares the way for the other... we cannot miss this and what it communicates about the story.

1. **Luke 1:5-25 Zechariah and Elizabeth**. They are the heart of the bridge between the past (the promise of Abraham and the covenant) and the present new covenant in Jesus Christ. (summarize story)
  - Selected by lot to be 1 of 5 who could minister in the Holy place (possibly only once/twice in their lifetime, only those who have never offered incense are able to go into the lot by selection.) Nearest point to the "presence of God" in the HoH.
  - **As we read their story we recalling another truth that God is watching and hearing, that in barrenness and need God steps in** (pause on this and repeat)- His Prayer is heard for his beyond childbearing age (old) Elizabeth who will bear a son – John the Baptist (Lk. 1:17). Some profound words are given about him for he will go on before the Lord, in the Spirit & power of Elijah, turning:
    - Children of Israel back to the Lord (1:16) – Repentance theme

- The hearts of the fathers to the children – caring and acting on their behalf (something God was about to do himself)
  - The disobedient to the wisdom of the just
  - *Turning their attention back to God in one love and to one another in perfect love. To see God's action/activity of love. (Isa.40:11) He is preparing the people for the first and greatest advent.*
  - Zech. has to just be quiet for a while and watch God work... Think of those months of silence, reflecting, trying to live in love to God, your wife, etc.
- Maybe there is something in this practice we can learn....**
- The message/promise to Zech. is a rehashing of the message/promise to Abe and Sarai for a son, God's loving promise of the past is re-engaging with Israel – His love is still there and has not changed.
  - Look at Liz in v.24, she remains in seclusion for five months. We don't see Zech. again until the moment of circumcision, at the naming.
  - In 1:57 it only notes, "She bore a son." Mysterious. "What is the narrator trying to do to build the suspense and show us what God is doing in this story, and with this one who will prepare the way?"
    - And Elizabeth rejoices when this favor is shown seeing she is the object of God's love that is for a greater purpose.

***Learning to love God in great disappointment while seeing His faithful love. A love that comes to turn His creation into people of love.***

Moving from promise to the fulfillment/event

- Jump top 1:57-64
  - V.58 Friends had heard she had been shown this great mercy and shared her joy (preview of celebration and expectation)
- Day 8 – Brisk - Elizabeth holding this child and declaring his name John, and Zechariah writes that on a tablet to name him John (God is gracious) and his lips open and he can speak. His first words of love/rejoicing are directed to bless God. 1:68-79 Zech. Benedictus and words worth chewing on
- what were their first words of love to one another?
  - 1:66 Everyone wondering, "What then would this child be?" The wonder and anticipation is building. Luke adds: *For indeed the hand of the Lord was with him.*

God is on the move and the context of love frames the hope, peace and joy of his expectation. This story heightens the significance of advent and shows us, ***this love will be so great that God is working beforehand to prepare all for that!***

- Image: Moment of a Ring bearer/flower girl preceding/preparing the way and the groom and guests anticipate what is to come....

## **2. Betrothal of Mary/Joseph Luke 1:27; Mt. 1:18, 2:5**

First birth story is in the Temple at Jerusalem, now we move to small town in Galilee.

- a. Love preceding this event in Nazareth – Branch town (at the Winepress? At the well?)
  - i. Small town where most were probably kin to each other.
  - ii. Josephus, writes of 45 towns in the region and never mentions Nazareth. The Talmud, the collected writings from Jewish rabbis in the ancient world, mentions 63 towns in Galilee, but never mentions Nazareth.
  - iii. Possibly those who grew up in a cave; yes, a teenage bride betrothed to a local man likely her elder; yes, almost certainly illiterate with no formal education; yes, a member of the *anawim*, those others called “the poor.” But Mary was also one who knew that good things came out of Nazareth, things like loving parents and kind neighbors, people who walked humbly with their God and watched for good things to grow out of even old cut off stumps.
- b. Relationship Status: It’s complicated**
  - i. Luke 1:27 Betrothed/Pledged to be married (engagement contract/bride price, and then nearly a year later, a wedding)
    - 1. Scandalous Scenario
  - ii. Mt. 1:18 Joseph wakes up from the dream and takes Mary as his wife
    - 1. Compassion and love vs. revenge or angry
  - iii. Luke 2:5 by the Census travel still only engaged (= marriage)

**3. Luke 2:7; Slowing down enough before you run to the shepherds to see the Love at that moment of holding the child, wrapping him. 2:16 Shepherds find them in this moment.**

- a. Grasping the human dimensions of a moment saturated with God. Luke’s attention to the care given with the cloths and manger. Spirit is directing a connection (later for the shepherds but also in the moment of care)
- b. Oxytocin release flooding through their bodies building attachment.
  - a. *Love so deep it changes you and all of your relationships.* That change was already there but with that deeper perspective about who Jesus is, they were forever changed
  - b. *Love that invites us to lean into more of who God created us to be*
  - c. *Increased capacity for love- it doesn’t take away from anyone it is just multiplied throughout the family*
  - d. *Family feels more complete and whole, didn’t feel lacking before, but it is complete now*
  - e. *New discovery of personality and new things to love about other family members – seeing how this new love changes people.*
- c. It’s not the matter of the environment, manger, stable – it’s the child inside of this rough, not ideal, smalltown village. The center of God’s love rests in the hands of a man and a woman, he rests in this manger.**
- d. *Titus 3:4-5* But when the goodness and loving kindness (affectionate concern) of God our Savior appeared, he saved us

The moment Jesus came into the world is a time when we can stop looking at how hard things are (for things were definitely hard) or the pain and delays we have. It is a time

when we stop and see the life that changes our lives. Don't pay attention to the circumstances, the environment, pay attention to what came - God showed Himself to us in Jesus.

***Fill in the Blank: We hold the love of God in our hands, and see His love is holding us***

4. **Intentional Reflection on all of this** - Mary herself was putting things together piece by piece.

Speaking of Mary the Mother of Jesus today I want to remind you (or reveal to you) the interesting dynamic of how **Mary was there from before the Manger, to the Cross, to the Early Church**. She was an eyewitness to the myriad of promises that were fulfilled and carried out in her son Jesus. She had the longest knowledge (however simple) of what God was doing, and she may have understood in a more unique and complex way than the disciples of who Jesus was and what He was doing.

- **Pondered** [*syballousa*] – Weighing things, trying to assemble everything that was said & done into an understandable whole. What was God doing? What did this mean? **Spiritual CSI**
  - Engaging in deep reflection, comparing thoughts, doubts, words & how they lined up
  - Using those memories to warm her affections to what the Lord was doing {Probably did this the most when Christ was being rejected & suffering}
- **Treasured** all these things [*diatereo*] – Continually Keeping or guarding something for a duration. Wanting to get the full value out of it

Think about it, Mary was front and center and there were many things she would have been treasuring & pondering:

1. Angels Words 1:26-28 Special honor to receive a message from the angel Gabriel. Mary is only one of three people to receive a visit from him (Daniel, Zechariah, & her)
  - a. **You are Highly Favored/You have found favor with God**
2. Elizabeth's Words
3. Joseph's Dreams
4. Shepherd's Report [Luke 2:8-19]
5. Simeon & Anna's Words [Luke 2:51]
6. Magi gifts and worship
7. Jesus in the Temple

And at the very end, we have Mary at Acts 1:14 – After watching Jesus ascend, we find the 11 disciples, the women that followed Jesus, and *Mary* with them as they prayed and waited for the filling of the Holy Spirit. One could suggest that she was there, with the disciples in those early stages, sharing about who her Son Jesus was, recounting His coming and what He had done. She knew who Christ was before anyone did because she was the very first person to whom God chose to reveal Christ's identity.

And *who the baby was is nothing compared to who Jesus is now. Our Savior, the King of Kings, Lord of lords.*

\*\* What can we learn from everyone who engaged with the unfolding story of Jesus, and what do **we do** the with the full story of Jesus Christ? How did they and how do we understand love?

Like Mary, we don't always see in the midst of it all where and how the story ends, and there is a gospel portion we can keep sharing about that love and hope. The things she treasured in her heart were spilling out...

### **Implications and Actions of our Love**

You remember some years more than others (whether good/bad). This may be a year you remember more. Will it be known for Love? To you? By you? Around you? I hope we can finish it and remember it as a year of experiencing love, and if not, may these last 11-12 days frame this for us.

*John 3:16-17* "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

We have to keep renewing our understanding & knowledge of God's love and what it means for living out our faith. Christian love must not be seen as an option for those who like that sort of thing.

It's easy to go through the motions of the season, they said. To do all the holiday things and expect the same things to happen. But we have to live intentionally with love across our Christmas practice. Not warm feelings but attitude in action:

### ***How do you feel loved at Christmas, how do you help others experience love?***

*[I have struggled with this throughout the year, and only in these last months have I started to move myself out of the fog] Open cloudy eyes...*

Interest in one another, concern, care compassion, seeking their welfare – God is already showing his love, he invites us to participate with Him in it.

- Identify the Needs (don't ignore them) – Francis Chan, Lukewarm people will be moved by stories of radical love and service **but will not act themselves...**
  - Take time to know others deeper -
  - Listen - open-eyed & open-eared, paying attention to their life. It is expressing love through an alert common sense
- Readiness to do anything for other people in their needs
  - God alone understands the full scope of the needs on earth (heck in this room) He alone has the resources to meet those human needs – That's why we need to be reminded that He is the manufacturer, and we are just distributors, mouthpieces Not trying to be messiahs or managers but spiritual funnels – obedient to God's will and his purpose.

- Forgive and remove judgment
  - The act of love will take us, sometimes, in the opposite direction of our feelings. I may dislike someone and still choose to lay down my life for them. I may choose to love them even if I don't feel like it.
  - The Motivation for our service must be Christ's love. People may not deserve what you are doing, they can have problems & be problems, that is where your service *is a model of grace, undeserved compassion and benevolence. It shows something greater is behind your action.* A great love.
- See how to assist vs demanding for yourself
- Self-denial - Will you give up what you want to do on Saturday, and do what someone else wants to do? Will you let them get the attention rather than you for a moment?
  - I have to, I want to, I don't feel like
- 5 Love Languages - A time when a creative hug, a kind act, loving interaction: spoken, typed, videoed, expressed, goes soooooooooo much farther.
- A time when words/actions/hearts of encouragement and love must rise. They have power. Interested in how much Proverbs addresses the power of the tongue...
  - Spiritual Exercise of Direct message -
  - Goff – Card - “Wow, what a hit Bob, you're a real ball player.” What I've found in following Jesus is that most of the time, when it comes to who says it, we each are the right people. These words have shelf life – they remain, but they have the ability to shape life. [Show my cards of encouragement]
  - There is a lot of non-encouraging words - I guarantee you that the person you're sitting next to is dying for encouragement. Desperately in need of encouragement.

We need to pray and *ask God to increase our love.* (rather than changing the ones to love). Paul prayed for this in the churches over and over again. Jesus painted a most extreme picture – Loving your enemies and not just those who love you.

The invitation of Christmas, when we celebrate the incarnation of God in human form, is to see the face of God in every human form—in those we have seen as lovely and those we have thought to be unlovely, perhaps even ourselves. **It's a time when we remember that God holds us all in equal significance, each of us loved and graced no more or less than anyone else. We don't have to be perfect to be deserving of love. We don't have to have it all together or know exactly how to do it to give love well. We can be who we are, because complicated, work-in-progress people and places aren't where love goes to die. They're precisely where God's love goes to be reborn.**

Let love be born in you in a new way. And I imagine that someone in this weary world will rejoice and say, “Oh! This is just the gift of love I've been waiting for.”

Recap:

- God is watching and hears and just as He has stepped in, He still steps in
- The love of Jesus turns our attention to God and towards one another
  - This love will be so great,
- Love and complicated relationships
- Love in the moment of birth – Holding love and being held by love
- Pondering these things

Mary. She doesn't perform any miracles. She doesn't heal anyone. She doesn't save anyone. Her speeches, while beautiful, do not teach any new lessons, challenge anyone to take the next step in their spirituality, or reform a tradition-bound religion. ***Mary's story is but a simple journey of faith and love from the first announcement of the angel to the initial growth of the early church.***

George Bush

We cannot hope to leave our children only a bigger car, a bigger bank account. We must give them a sense of what it means to be a loyal friend, a loving parent, a citizen who leaves his home and neighborhood and town better than he found it. What do we want the men and women who work with us to say when we are no longer there? That we were more driven to succeed than anyone around us? Or that we stopped to ask if a sick child had gotten better and stayed a moment there to trade a word of friendship.