

Sermon for Christmas Eve 2016 – “A Love Story”

Christmas Eve, Year A – Texts: Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20

Tonight, as we gather in this place, people are being drawn to houses of worship all over the world. Quietly, solemnly, they come. It's as the song says: Everywhere, everywhere Christmas tonight. And, we too are drawn to the splendor of this night. We, too, come to see the candles gently push away the darkness. Everywhere, everywhere, Christmas tonight.

Why are we here tonight? Is it because we love Christmas music? It's occurred to me that only God could've thought of Christmas. Only God's inspiration could've touched so many composers of the world's most beautiful music. There's very little comparable to, or as beautiful as, our Christmas music. But, why are you drawn here? What's pulled you out of your home tonight to this place? Have you come because it's a dark, dark world and you feel the darkness around you and within you? Have you come because you feel the numbness of depression? That you're really drawn to the darkness rather than the light? Is that why you've come? It's a dark world out there, a very dark, very cold, world. This past year, you may have personally felt the prolonged darkness of grief, pain, loneliness, or isolation. Why have you come tonight?

I suspect that some of you've come tonight because you want to hear the good news that in Jesus Christ, there's light, and in Him there's no darkness at all. You've come to hear once again that the eternal light is much stronger than the darkness. That the darkness has not, will not, cannot, overcome it. You've come tonight because you want to be filled with light. You want to be led by the light of Christ within you. Why? Why have you come?

Is it because you're afraid? Are you here tonight to hear the word from the angels: “Fear not, for unto you is born this night a savior”? Why? Why are you here tonight?

Are you here because someone (your spouse, your kids) dragged you here? Is church one of the last places in the world you want to be tonight? Maybe everything's done and you'd just as soon be home relaxing. Maybe some eggnog, feet up, in front of the TV or the fireplace. Maybe the exact opposite's true. Maybe you still have too much to still do and just want a break from all that, if only for a little while. Is that why you're here?

Is it because it's Christmas Eve, and you know that you belong? And that you belong here on Christmas Eve because deep down you know that you belong to God?

Whatever the reason, I think one thing's certain. We've come to hear about that one magnificent moment in history. That moment when God became one of us. When God became a human being, a person. Someone that knows what it is to feel fear and sadness, denial, betrayal, abandonment, pain...But who also knows what it is to feel peace, joy, friendship, acceptance, love. Why have we come here?

We come here, because, God help us, we love it. We love everything about it. We love Christmas. The memories. The traditions. We love the message of Christmas. The Christmas story. We love it because it reminds us of God's great love for us. It reminds us that God's love doesn't demand perfection, that forgiveness and grace aren't given away sparingly, but recklessly and indiscriminately. That unconditional really means unconditional. That God's love is completely and thoroughly inclusive. And that nothing can separate us from it. Nothing!

I wish with all my heart that everybody could read it that way, but way too many people read it like a used car sales contract. Having sold used cars at one time, I know what I'm talking about. Sadly, in all those beautiful love verses throughout the bible, they hear only clauses and conditions. All the consequences should any of them ever be broken.

So, I thank God that Christmas comes around to remind us that God isn't in the business of keeping records of the bad stuff we do. If he were, then I suspect that Jesus would've never been born into the deplorable circumstances and conditions that Luke describes. No, Christmas is the beginning of a classic love story with all the right ingredients, infatuation, pursuit, risk and relationship. Ultimately that's why we're here. We come to hear the story of how God came down the stairway of the stars with a baby in His arms and laid Him in a manger. A manger in a stable in a little town in the middle of nowhere. Where the hopes and fears of all the years are met. We come to hear about the audacity of God, who comes down to earth as one of us, **Fully** us. Doesn't it make sense that if God wanted to communicate with us He'd become one of us? And the truth is, He **did!** In fact, He's been trying to get our attention for years with varying degrees of success. But, there was still so much He needed to say to us, so much about His love for us and His plan to renew all of creation. His vision of the kingdom of heaven here on earth! So much we still needed to hear.

Is that why we're here, because we need to hear from God? Because we need to hear once more about that baby in the manger? Because we need the Word of God to once again break heaven's silence? Because we need Him to bring His peace into our violence? To bid our hungry souls be filled? If that's the case, I've good news. The story hasn't ended – God's not done. God's still speaking. God's still active in the world. God's still writing the Christmas story. And here's the thing, we can all be part of that story. But, I wonder, will we?

It seems to me that if you're here tonight, some part of you wants to. Some part of you wants to be a part of love made real. A part of what God's doing in the world. Some part of you wants to be a part of the on-going Christmas story. What must we do? It's simple, make room in your hearts for Christ. Make room and let it all in. All year... Because after all the gifts have been opened (and returned or exchanged), after Christmas dinner's been eaten (as well as the leftovers), after the tree's been taken down and decorations are back in the attic, after the nativity set goes back into its box, after all that is gone – something far more important remains. And the ultimate test of how well we've celebrated Christmas this year? Well, it won't be how well our homes or churches were decorated or what was under the tree. Nothing like that...It'll be in how well we open our hearts to the Christmas message, to this love of God. May we do so this Christmas, and always.

I'd like close by telling you a story about a Christmas pageant that like life itself didn't go quite as planned. A youth group was performing a live nativity scene. Joseph and Mary and all the angels were in place and ready. They played their parts with seriousness and commitment looking as pious and solemn as they possibly could. And then it came time for the shepherds to enter. In they come, dressed in flannel bathrobes and toweled head gear. The shepherds walked into the sanctuary. They took their places on the chancel steps where Mary and Joseph looked solemnly at the straw-filled manger. A manger containing a single bare light bulb that was playing the part of the glowing newborn Jesus. With his back to the congregation, one of the shepherds said to the person playing Joseph, in a very loud whisper for all the cast to hear: "Well, Joe, when are you gonna pass out cigars?" Needless to say, the solemnity of the occasion was gone. Everyone burst out laughing. Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the angels, everyone was laughing! The chief angel, standing on a chair behind them, was the worst of all. She was shaking in laughter so hard, that she fell off her chair and took the curtained back drop and all the rest of the props down with her. In short order, the entire was in shambles. But you know what? The only thing that **didn't** break? Yep, that light bulb in the manger. It never stopped shining!

Brothers and sisters, here's the thing. That baby in the manger, Yep – that baby, is the light of our world. Even when our world has crumbled around us. Because in that baby, the Divine and the human come together. The infant Jesus is our living, breathing sign of the immeasurable love that God's had for all of us from the very beginning.

The Christmas story is the living promise that we're never, ever alone. No matter where we are in life. No matter where we might find ourselves. No matter how unfaithful we are. No matter how far away we might stray. God, who **is** love, will pursue us! God will pursue us with a love that never diminishes and a story that is never-ending!

May God bless each and every one of you and those you love on this Christmas Eve and always!

Come, Lord Jesus!

Amen and amen.