

SERMON TITLE: "Love in Our Hearts"

SERMON TEXT: Luke 2:8-20

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: December 24, 2023, at 10:00 a.m. at First United Methodist Church

### **INTRODUCTION**

Throughout this month, we've been focusing our attention on the themes of the Advent candles. We began by talking about what we should hope for. Then we talked about the way of peace. Last Sunday, the Chancel Choir sang their lovely cantata and lifted our hearts with musical joy. Now, today, we have come to the fourth candle of love.

Immediately, this makes me think of the 1885 Christmas carol by Christina Rossetti:

Love came down at Christmas, Love all lovely, Love divine;  
Love was born at Christmas; star and angels gave the sign.

As a way for us to get our heads around this love which came down at Christmas, let's consider the story from Luke 2. After the shepherds went to the stable and told Jesus' parents all that the angels had made known to them, Jesus' mother Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. Let's think this morning what it would mean for us to treasure and ponder this love divine that came down at Christmas. What would it mean for us to have this love in our hearts?

### **1—GOD LOVES US!**

The first meaning of this love in our hearts is that God loves us! There was nothing that required God to come down into humanity that first Christmas. There was nothing that mandated that God would intervene in human affairs. But God chose to do so. As John 3:16 tells us, God sent his only begotten son because "God so loved the world."

If we would have any thoughts that God loved the world because human beings were pretty, sweet, and nice, we'd be mistaken. If we would imagine that God loved the world because people

were obedient and good, we'd be wrong. If we would construe that God loved the world because we human beings have been loyal and faithful disciples of Jesus, that would be erroneous, as well. Over and over again, in story after story, and verse after verse, the Bible tells us that God has loved us in spite of ourselves.

For example, 1 John 4:10 explains, "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that God loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." And Romans 5:8 proclaims that "God proves his love for us in that, while we yet were sinners, Christ died for us." Both those statements of faith pertain to Jesus' death on the cross. But, of course, Jesus' atoning life and death were only possible because he was first born into the world as God's act of mercy and love.

And that's what Mother Mary was treasuring and pondering in Luke 2. She certainly didn't know yet all that would unfold throughout Jesus' life. But, in that moment, in that stable in Bethlehem, Mary knew that God had given her a child. In a time of very high maternal mortality, God had helped her through the risks of pregnancy and the pains of labor. Even in a dirty barn, God had assisted her to give birth to a relatively healthy baby. And even though Mary and Joseph were away from home and without normal family and community support, God sent them some friendly and encouraging shepherds who brought amazingly positive news. Mary certainly didn't understand it all yet; there was no way she could. But other people were obviously excited and had such high hopes for her child. How could she not be amazed? How could she not feel the warmth of God's love in her heart?

The story of Jesus' birth offers this same love of God to all of us. Just as God entered the world in a stinky, manure-filled barn, God's love comes to us no matter how bad our circumstances might be. No matter what kind of mess we're in, God's love is available to us. This love that came down at Christmas wasn't just for the wealthy or the well-adjusted. This love that was born in a barn was ample and strong enough to cover every kind of sin and heal every kind of suffering. No

matter what kind of person we are, no matter what our life has been like, no matter what type of temptations or traumas have troubled us, Jesus was born for us. The Christmas story assures us that God doesn't wait for us to clean up and get our act together first. Rather, God enters into the world in the poorest and most stressful circumstances and offers the opportunity for us to treasure, ponder, and receive God's love in our hearts.

## **2—LOVE CHANGES US!**

There's nothing quite like having a baby to change a person's life. And that explains the second meaning of love in our hearts. Love changes us!

How often do we observe a young person who is carefree and maybe a bit reckless and self-centered suddenly become settled, responsible, and caring when a baby enters the household? Not every biological parent rises to this level of love, of course, but most do. Whether it's caused by the bonding hormone oxytocin, by evolved human instinct, or by expected societal norms—somehow, babies exert that kind of influence over the adults in their lives. Tiny as they are, babies powerfully elicit the parental impulse to protect, nurture, and provide. Babies refocus our attention and transform our priorities.

Can you imagine Mary sitting there in that stable in Bethlehem with her newborn baby? Can you imagine her thoughts about how her life was being changed? Even if she had grown up expecting to become a mother someday, no doubt the characteristics of *this* pregnancy and birth would have caught her by surprise and sent her life on a different trajectory. From now on, she had the maternal responsibility not only of raising a child, but also of shaping the savior who would change the world.

God's love that is freely given to *us* also has this miraculous way of transforming *our* lives. As 1 John 4 discusses, "God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him." As the love of Jesus is born in our hearts, we are called to a life of love. "Because God first loved us,"

we are empowered and expected to love one another. We are called to love one another as if each and every child of God were our very own.

Of course, this change that love makes in our hearts requires a stretch. First, we stretch to love those in our own family. Then we stretch to love those who are in our church, our community, and our world. We stretch to love those who are similar to us, and we stretch even more to love those who are different from us. We stretch to love those who cause us frustration and those who require things of us that we'd rather not give. We stretch to love those who have even been our enemies. We stretch in love because God's love enters our hearts and changes us!

This past week, I read an article about the Christmas song "Good King Wenceslas." I'm sure you know the title, and maybe even the first line or two. But, if you're like me, that's about all you have known of the song. The song tells about a Christian king who saw and assisted a poor man who was freezing in the winter cold. Music scholars inform us that the ballad was most likely inspired by the real-life Czechoslovakian Duke Vaclav the Good, who lived in the early 900s. Vaclav the Good was known for his Christian "deeds of mercy" and "caring for the poor, widows, orphans, and even prisoners. He opposed the slave market and would buy slaves to set them free. He was also known for negotiating peace with" their Bavarian enemies.\* This is the kind of positive change and influence that God's love can have in our hearts.

Of course, doing charitable deeds isn't the only way to love other people. Sometimes, in fact, charitable deeds distract us from the deeper changes that need to happen in our society. If we love the poor, we don't just want to give them some food, some Christmas toys, or a temporary bed in a homeless shelter. We want to change the structures of our society so that everyone has what they need to live with dignity. We want to make it possible that everyone receives mental and physical healthcare, that corporations pay living wages, and that affordable housing is available. We want to ensure that CEOs and shareholders don't take all the profits for their millionaire and

billionaire lifestyles, while everyday citizens struggle to make ends meet. And we want to slow the warming of our planet, to mitigate suffering for people who are already vulnerable to flooding, drought, and starvation.

When God's love entered the world in the conception of baby Jesus, Mary sang a song called the Magnificat. That song is found in Luke chapter one. Mary sang, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior . . . The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. . . . He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." Mary's understanding of God's love, the divine love which she treasured and pondered in her heart, was a love that was going to change people's personal lives in such profound ways that we would be empowered to change human society. This is the life-changing love of God that can be present in our hearts.

### **CONCLUSION**

I began this sermon by quoting the lyrics of Christina Rossetti's Christmas carol *Love Came Down at Christmas*. Another famous song writer by the name of Charles Wesley put it this way:

Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven, to earth come down;  
fix in us thy humble dwelling; all thy faithful mercies crown!  
Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure, unbounded love thou art;  
visit us with thy salvation; enter every trembling heart.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, when we light the candle of love, may we open our trembling hearts to the love of God. No matter how complicated and messy our life circumstances, may we experience God's love for each of us personally. And then, may we also experience that love as a transformative power, which sets us on a new trajectory of life, so that we become positive agents of change in our world. This, I believe, is what it means to have God's love in our hearts.

\*Heather Hahn, "The real story behind 'Good King Wenceslas,'" UM News, Dec. 15, 2023.