

“Advent Love”

(*Note: due to possible Covid exposure, Pastor Jason was not here yesterday therefore this sermon is different from the audio sermon as Sheila Black preached in his place at the last minute.)

Isaiah 54:4-8; I John 4:7-12

December 20, 2020

This week we close out our four-week sermon series. We’ve been following the Advent liturgical calendar which takes a particular facet of God shown to us in and through our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus far we’ve talked about Hope, Peace and Joy. This week we’ll dive into the biggest one of them all – LOVE.

We all love, love, don’t we?

Now look, I’m painfully aware that many of us have had difficulty with love and I’m not here to diminish a bit of any of that. We live in a broken world and sometimes our love of other people or our misunderstanding of it, even, can lead us to the worst pains of all. But even after those bad experiences, I don’t think that there’s anyone here that dislikes the idea of what love should be, right?

In fact, I think that to deny the primacy of love in our lives is in some small way a denial of God. Why would I say that? First John 4:8 tells us point blank, **“Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.”**

And I think that the overwhelming emphasis on God’s love comes shining through in our Bibles, especially as we learn about Jesus Christ. Most of us here, even if we’re not particularly Christian know John 3:16, **“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”**

This one verse encapsulates the Gospel message probably more succinctly than any other verse in the Bible. But I want you to notice something.

Now what do you think about when you hear the word LOVE? Is it that warm feeling when you’re with people you trust entirely? Perhaps you think about being giddy, schoolgirl, head-over-heels in romantic love?

Now those are absolutely experiences of love. But what is love itself?

Let me tell you a story.

Just the other day, my wife was feeling bad. Nothing serious thankfully, just a sinus headache but it had her curled up in bed. Literally surrounding her, one even on top of her, were all three of our cats. Now this is a surprising occurrence in that while two of them get along really well, one of them seems to not be so fond of either of the others. But there they all were in the same room, in close proximity, all of them huddled around Natalie.

You know me, sometimes I get to thinking the world really does revolve around me. So instead of thinking “how cute is that,” I gotta tell you, my first thought was, “they’ve never done that for me.” In fact, I was sick just a few weeks back and laying on the exact same bed and yet I struck the cats as little more compelling to hang out with than the downstairs couch.

But then I realized something.

I say I love the cats, and I do, y’all, I’m a borderline crazy cat-person but my care of the cats is, well, limited. My wife, she’s a veterinarian she’s dedicated her life to animals. Not only that she’s the one who feeds them wet food, I just dump a cup of kibbles into their bowl with half-bleary eyes when I first wake up. My wife is the one who gives them treats, who cares for their wounds. Given her training, she even heals their sicknesses. In fact, 9 times out of 10 it’s my wife who scoops out their litterbox.

So maybe it’s safer to say I really like the cats while Natalie really loves the cats. After all, she’s the one taking the actions. I’m convinced now that here’s a reason the cats wanted to be with Natalie. They may like me, but they LOVE Natalie.

You see, we can only really know of another persons’ love for us by their actions. Anyone can say the words but the proof is in the pudding, isn’t it?

When we look in our Bibles, we see that God’s love is invariably an action. In fact, the word love itself is used in the Bible far more often as a verb than a noun.

This Christmas, as we look at the LOVE of God in Christ, we need to recognize that God’s love towards us is an ongoing action (not feeling) that stretches back even before Creation itself.

Now many of you may be thinking, “Pastor Jason, I’ve read the Bible. I know Genesis. Doesn’t it begin with “In the beginning?” Yes, it does. But what happened before that? What’s the backstory, if you will?

Before creation comes imagination.

Let me see if I can explain that. My wife and I, we are so blessed to be the parents of two children, Benjamin and Lillian. We chose to have children because there was just so much love between she and I that it seemed selfish to keep it all to ourselves.

The Christian belief is that God is love and that love between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit overflowed into the act of creation. It was so great it spilled out into making the heavens and earth.

So how do we know God loves us? Because God took action. Look around. See the beauty of the trees, the grass, the flowers. Stare up into the night sky, see the stars and the planets. In those things, you see God's love. He also made us, a fact that we shouldn't overlook either.

In the Book of Ephesians, the Bible teaches us that *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him."*

Think about that for a moment.

God loved you millennia before you were even you. That's a powerful, awesome, unimaginable love. He imagined you and then, when the time was right, he placed you here, within His good creation.

I recognize that sometimes that kind of love can be hard to connect with, abstract, hard to fathom so that it becomes easy to deny. But consider this, should you ever doubt God's love for you ever again. You can know God's love because you're here. HE took action and keeps on taking action to sustain you.

Our existence is proof positive that there is a God and, more significantly, a God who loves us. At the risk of being crude, you were a 1-in-250,000,000 chance for being conceived. Those are winning the lottery kinda odds. You won the lottery yet, the big one? No? Well you did, in a way, because here you are. You won in and through God's love!

But beyond that, you were born on a stable planet which could support your life. Presently scientists estimate that there's something on the order of 60 billion inhabitable planets. Now that just means something could live there, not necessarily you. But still, let's go with that number. Sounds like pretty good chance for life, right?

EHHH. Not so much.

Those same scientists estimate that there's something like 4 trillion planets in the universe which means that we only had a .02% chance of life maybe a whole lot less, actually. And yet, here we are.

So, you made it. That's an act of love, isn't it? But now, think about all the ways and means by which you could've died thus far in your life. Now for those of us who are addicts and alcoholics, those numbers may be higher than normal but, still, HERE WE ARE.

When people say, "somebody up there must love us," believe me when I tell you. They're right, the numbers do not die. God loves you!

In Creation, God channeled his mighty and awesome power in order to forge everything you and I will ever encounter, and he did it because he loves us.

But, if we keep reading in Genesis we realize right from the outset, we messed things up. God gives our ancestors Adam and Eve just one command, don't eat of that tree and faster than it takes to make cookies in an Easy-Bake oven, they do it anyway.

But I'm convinced Jesus knew exactly what would happen with us and He helped create us all, anyway.

One year just a little bit before Easter, my wife and I took our then 3-year-old son Benjamin into a Toys 'R' Us over in Gastonia. It was getting later in the afternoon and Ben was already a little tired, a sure sign that going into a toy store was probably not the greatest idea we'd ever conceived. Nevertheless, we persisted and took him in.

Everything was going really well until it got to be time for us to check out. Just as we were walking towards the registers, Ben caught sight of the largest Thomas the Train display I think I've ever seen. He goes tottering over to it which was fine at the outset. He was occupied while Natalie got in line to make our purchase.

Well, the lines were slow that day it being so close to Easter, I guess and, in that time, my little son had bonded with a particular steam tram train named Toby. You see, the display had tons of the figures out and available to play with. Almost like a cosmic force, Ben had been drawn to Toby and he played with him the entire time we waited.

Like I said, they bonded.

But finally, Natalie was done. She summoned us to come on.

“Ben,” I said, “It’s time to go.”

Ben was not going to go.

I gradually said the same time more forcefully but, still, it was clear Ben wasn’t going to budge. Finally, Natalie called out, “just pick him up, we’ve GOT to go.”

And we did, we had some social engagement that particular day that we were in danger of running late for.

So, I hoisted Ben up and began walking away with him in my arms.

It was then that Ben began wailing like something out of a Sophoclean tragedy, “TOO-BEEEE” he screamed, stretching his arm out over my shoulder like he was being separated forever from a beloved family member.

Then, in protest, Ben began flailing his arms out, hitting me really as sadness turned to anger. It was then that I ran into two of the families that attended the church I was pastoring. So, there I am, a screaming, hitting, kicking (Did I mention that) kid. Finally, we were able to get out of the store and into the car whereupon Ben wailed without ceasing the entire trip back to Mount Holly, about 20 minutes or so.

Now look, when I think about that incident, if by some means or way, I dunno, somebody showed me ahead of time what was about to happen and allowed me the opportunity to make a different decision, to not go into the store, thereby avoiding all the embarrassment and hassle, believe me, I would’ve taken that deal in a New York minute.

Thankfully, God’s love is greater.

Sometimes we may think Jesus was God’s reaction to our sin. But when we read the Bible more closely, we realize that Jesus was God’s plan for us all along. KNOWING WE WOULD stray, God created us anyway and Jesus accepted the role of being our savior. It isn’t like God was surprised by our sin, rather he fashioned a solution ahead of time and then, in the fullness of time, He took action sending Jesus Christ into the world.

For in order to save us, Jesus had to take on flesh and be limited in a way that I think would be difficult were not the motivation love.

I think about it like back when Benjamin was young. Now look, toddlers are a full-time deal, aren’t they? Many were the day when my friends were doing something that looked fun and yet there I was changing diapers. At home. My options were limited because I made a choice to love.

On a much, much, much larger scale. So did Jesus.

I read to you from Philippians 2 Jesus “*who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*”

Now look, y’all. That’s some love. Jesus who one day could’ve zipped around the universe and across time made the decision to take on human flesh and be limited, fixed. Forever. That’s love.

But not only that, he came not as a king or a hero or a rich man but as a savior and a suffering servant one at that. I mean when I go out of town, I want to stay at the Ritz-Carlton, not the Super 8, right? But Jesus didn’t come as a powerful king, he came as a simple, humble servant, born in a manger.

Because Jesus had a mission. It was one he’d chosen way, way back. He came to die for us so that we might die to sin and live for God!

1 John 2:2 – Jesus Christ “*... is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*” OR, as John the Baptist puts it in the Gospel of John, “*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*”

Not only did God create you in love, you were redeemed in his love through the death of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

Again, God’s love is an action. God sent Jesus. Jesus went to the Cross. God didn’t just say, “Man, those human beings, I really dig them” and then go back to doing God kinda stuff leaving us all alone in the cosmos. NO. He did something. Jesus didn’t look at humanity and say, “Man, those are some sinful folk, I sure do hope they get their act together.” No! He walked a lonely path to the Cross where a totally sinless man DIED for other people’s guilt. For my sins, for your sins.

And HE KEEPS ON DOING IT!

Look, if you’re new to this Christianity thing, you make think that church is where the good people go and that you can’t go yet because you’re not quite good enough. Or maybe you believe that once you really get into church, you’re going to be darn near perfect.

Let me dispel those myths for you. Church isn't where the good people go, as if there were any of those. No, Church is where sin-sick souls go to get healing on an ongoing basis. Jesus loves us so much he continues to care for us, even when we're not doing the right things.

Just look at the Scriptures and what you see is a God who loves us so stinking much that he continues to abide with us, even when we act like complete buffoons. I mean, that didn't start with us.

Noah, as soon as his feet get dry after the flood, he plants a vineyard and gets stinking drunk. Yet God continued to abide and provide for him. Even after making a covenant with God, Abram lied about Sarah being his wife not once but twice even though he had no need to. Samson, well, he had a problem with Philistinian women, didn't he? And what about Peter denying Jesus three times yet still being the Rock upon which the church was built?

You see, over and over again all the way down into our very lives, God has this habit of abiding and caring for even those people who have rejected Him and His ways.

So, if you're here feeling guilty about something you've done, you're in the right place, join the crowd. If you think you've done something unforgiveable and don't deserve God's love, hear the Good News, IN JESUS CHRIST, YOU ARE FORGIVEN.

And guess what?

God isn't going to leave you where he found you.

The Bible teaches us that God's love for us is so powerful, he wants us to experience an abundant life here and now. And that doesn't mean that you're going to be rich or famous. An abundant life is a life filled with, you got it, LOVE.

God is going to pick you up, dust you off. Teach you why you were really created.

Jesus clues us into that in the 13th chapter of the Gospel of John, saying *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

When we stop living selfish, self-centered lives what we experience is nothing short of miraculous. When we let go of our old ideas and instead allow God's Holy Spirit to fill us, we'll know a new freedom and a new happiness. As God sanctifies us, that is, recreates us in His image, we'll not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it.

And all of it will happen not by our power or our self-will but through our surrender. In order to fully experience God's love, a love shown through His Creation and His Redemption what we've just gotta say, not me but you. Not I Lord but Thou. God, I surrender my life to you. I've experienced self-will run riot and I know what it leads to. Just for today, Lord, guide me O great Jehovah. Let me seek your will and not my own.

Now I used to pastor in a small town and for those of you who've lived in them, you know, a small town never forgets. Because you see I had this congregant, Tim. Time was a big guy, maybe 6'5" or so and large, not fat mind you, just a big frame. Muscular as he'd been an auto mechanic most of his life. Now, when I met Tim, he taught a Sunday school class, was very involved in the church's outreach. An amazingly kind-hearted man.

But one day, one of the church gossips sidled up to me and told me about Tim's past. She said he'd been in a motorcycle gang and had done some terrible things. He'd beat his wife, served time for robbery. She told me all about Tim's past.

And, as it would turn out, she was right.

He HAD done those things.

But he was no longer that guy. I promise. God began something one day in his life. Another man from the church took the time to get to know Tim, then invited him to church and then to his Sunday school class. That man loved Tim enough to teach him the Word. Then, as cancer struck him, he handed the reins of that class over to Tim, trusting him enough to teach it.

Tim's life changed in Christ Jesus. And it kept on growing.

One day, Tim was diagnosed with cancer and he started to going to chemotherapy sessions. There are a lot of fear in those waiting rooms, y'all. Tim, as usual, brought his Bible to read as he waited. And you know what happened? Some of those frightened people, well, they asked Tim about Jesus. And he taught them.

Now look, some of those people died. Tim, in fact, assisted at one of their services actually. But some of them didn't. Tim did, but his legacy of love lives on in the lives of the people he helped introduce to Jesus never-ending love.

Christmas is a wonderful time to remember that God's love is action. We know that in what he's created for us. We know that in what He's done for us through Jesus Christ, forgiving us. And we know that in what He's doing for us, leading us more fully to Him, more fully to know and experience and share His love with the world – the reason we were created in the first place.