

Title: The Promise - Love
Date: December 19, 2021
Subject: Our awareness of God's love comes from the Christ of Christmas.
Scripture: Selected

I've previously sought out stories to use at Christmas. Some are shorter like the one about the orphan boy Misha used two weeks ago. Some have been longer like The Secret of the Gifts about the wisemen. Sometimes I created stories -- a shepherd from Bethlehem...South Dakota or angel #5. Sometimes they've been about one of the Biblical characters in the birth narrative of Jesus Christ and we've used our sanctified imaginations to flesh out the stories.

Today's story is an original story about love, our subject for the fourth Sunday of Advent. I should say it is **the** original love story. The Bible is God's love letter. Sometimes He speaks his love directly as he did to his people in the Old Testament: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness" (Jeremiah 31:3; Malachi 1:2) and as Jesus said to his 12 disciples and to us: "I have loved you" (John 13:34, 15:9, 12). There are tons of times God's love is described. I'm going to combine these kinds of elements into a first person telling of God's love.

If you're looking for Bible references, there are a lot, too many. If we turned to them all, the pages flipping would create a constant breeze. And citing them would interrupt the flow of the message. In case you're curious, I've already connected us to five of them. You can find the verses later if you go to the sermon from the website. There are at least 70 referenced.

This message will be an extremely simple one on which to take notes. It's so simple you'll be able to do it afterwards. There may be some of you who've already filled in the blanks or tried to. Let me encourage you to leave the notes in the bulletin and listen to the story.

To begin, you have to fill in a blank, again, not in the sermon notes, but in your head.

Dear _____ fill in the blank, put your name there.

I have loved you. I have always loved you. In fact, I've loved you even before I created the world (Ephesians 1:4), before you came to be, before you breathed your first breath. I loved you when I first set my eyes on you when I created your inmost being and knit you together in your mother's womb...your frame was not hidden from me when you were made in the secret place...my eyes saw your unformed body (Psalm 139:13, 15, 16).

I loved you and made you in my image (Genesis 1:26, 27). I know when you sit and when you rise; I perceive your thoughts from afar. I discern your going out and your lying down; I am familiar with all your ways (Psalm 139:2, 3).

My love for you led me to choose you so you could hear the Good News of what my Son Jesus has done and be saved (Colossians 3:12, 1 Thessalonians 1:4, 2 Thessalonians 2:13). “I love those who love me” (Proverbs 8:17, John 14:21).

To what shall I compare my love? My love is as high as the heavens are above the earth (Psalm 103:11). How far can you see when you look into the sky? I asked Abraham if he could count the stars. At night, do you see the constellations and faint specks of stars that are in the galaxies beyond? Be reminded my love for you stretches from earth to the heavens – to the farthest limits of the universe.

My love for you is abundant (Exodus 34:6, 7 and numerous other places). There’s a lot of it. There’s plenty to go around. It keeps flowing and overflowing from me. It’s accompanied by forgiveness, compassion, graciousness, faithfulness and being slow to anger. I keep showing my love to you.

Some people in the Old Testament abused my love for them. They rejected it and me and didn't love me in return, but I continued to love them (Psalm 98:3). I love my children even though at times I discipline the ones I love, for what father who truly loves his children fails to discipline them? (Proverbs 3:12, Hebrews 12:5 - 7).

Others couldn’t believe I could love anyone but them, didn’t want me to love anyone but them. Take Jonah. He knew I’m abounding in love, compassionate, gracious, slow to anger and said so (Jonah 4:2). However, he didn’t want his worst enemies to receive that love. My expression of love to those he hated drove him to ask me to take away his life (Jonah 4:3). I pointed out my love and concern for the city of Nineveh... and for him (Jonah 4:11).

My love for you is incomparable (Ephesians 2:7). There’s no other love like it. Not that of mother for child. Not that of bride and groom. Not that of patriot for his country. None comes close. They all fall short. They pale in comparison.

My love for you is unfailing (Psalm 107:8). It’s trustworthy, dependable, unshakable. It doesn’t have ebbs and flows. It doesn’t have any shortcomings. Unlike those who’ve let you down and may have even broken your heart, I won’t let you down. I won’t break your heart. I mend broken hearts.

My love is eternal (1 Kings 10:9). My love goes beyond this time on earth. “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what I’ve prepared” (1 Corinthians 2:9). Not the prophets of old, not the Apostle Paul who was caught up to the third heaven, to paradise, where he heard things man is not permitted to tell (2 Corinthians 12:2 – 4).

The totality of my love is incomprehensible to the human mind, to your mind. It’s immeasurable with human elements of weight and volume. It’s so vast it’s extent would blow your minds, yet you are able to experience it (Ephesians 3:18).

My love for you is so strong and tenacious and protective that there’s nothing that will be able to take you out of my hand (John 10:28, 29) -- not trouble, not hardship, not persecution, not famine, not danger, not sword, not death, not life, not angels, not demons, not the present times, not the future, not any powers (devilish

or human), not height, not depth, not anything else in all creation. There is nothing that will separate you from my love that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:35, 38, 39).

I know there are occasions when you don't sense my love. This has been the case for my people at times. From time to time they cried out, "O Lord, where is your former great love?" (Psalm 89:49), "How have you loved us?" (Malachi 4:2).

When my people were languishing in captivity and even after they were released, they were discouraged. I sent my spokesmen to remind them of my love. "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord Almighty...Who dares despise the day of small things?" (Zechariah 4:6, 10). I gave them promises of the coming Messiah (Branch in Zechariah 3:8, 6:12): "See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9). I sought to remind my people I was up to something. . . though they had to wait. I'm up to something in your life. . . though you may have to wait.

I AM love (1 John 4:8, 16). That's who I am. Love. L. O. V. E. Love. At the core of my nature, my being, my essence and in my actions toward you, toward all people, all the time. Love.

This would all be empty words if I didn't take action to back them up. Since I love you, I've showered you with gifts (James 1:17). They are good and perfect gifts – just exactly what you need and if you thought about it, what you really want. These gifts aren't from some stranger, someone who is trying to entice you to something less than you can be. They are from me, "the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17).

My greatest gift to you, my boldest act of love, didn't wearing the robes and crowns of royalty. There wasn't a blaring trumpet fanfare heralding a royal announcement: "Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention. It gives me great pleasure to inform you that God has become man. He is the King of kings. As such, you are expected to treat him with all the courtesy and respect due royalty." No. He wasn't born in a palace with a silver spoon in his mouth.

He didn't come as an armed and armored conqueror - smashing, thrashing and threatening his way through humanity: "All of you weaklings, bow and cringe before me, for in my hands I hold the power of life and death. Do you hear me?" No. He didn't come as a heavenly invader.

My gift to you was born as a weak and helpless baby, wrapped in strips of cloth and was found in a manger. He was named Jesus. He was and is my Son, my only Son, the Son of God, "my Son whom I love" (Matthew 3:17, Mark 9:7).

Jesus was the full expression of love, not human love, but my love. I loved him before the creation of the world (John 17:24). He was love incarnate. As I, the Father loved him, so has he loved you (John 15:9). He said about me, "I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them" (John 17:26). I want you to know me and love me.

While my Son was on the earth, he reached out to those who needed love. All people do but he didn't overlook those on the fringes. He touched the lepers and healed them when no one else would get close (Luke 17:11 – 19). He removed demons from those who were possessed (Luke 8:26 – 39). He associated with sinners – tax collectors, prostitutes – and received scathing criticism for doing so (Matthew 9:10, 11). Some didn't like it he allowed people who were partly Jewish or women (John 4) or children to get close to him. He said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them" (Matthew 19:14).

There's more. "I so loved the world, every person who has ever lived and ever will live, which includes you, that I gave my one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For I didn't send my Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned" (John 3:16 – 18).

"This is how I showed my love among you: I sent my one and only Son into the world that you might live through him. This is love: not that you loved God, but that I loved you and sent my Son as an atoning sacrifice for your sins" (1 John 4:9, 10). "This is how you know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for you" (1 John 3:16). I demonstrate my own love for you in this: while you were still sinners. . . Christ died for you (Romans 5:8). Christ loved you and gave himself up for you as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Ephesians 5:2, 25). From the cross, he was saying, "I love you... I love you... I...love...you."

My Son would be despised, take up your infirmities, carry your sorrows, be pierced for your transgressions, crushed for your iniquities, the punishment that brings you peace would be upon him and by his wounds you would be healed (Isaiah 53:3 – 6). He would suffer, be rejected, be killed and after three days rise again (Mark 8:31).

Why do I love you? Why did I act in love? Why did I bother with you? I chose not to leave you on your own, to find your way to me. I poured out my love into your hearts so you could know who I am and my love could be in you (Romans 5:5). You need not die in your sins (John 8:24).

"Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool" (Isaiah 1:18). "As far as the east is from the west, so far have I removed your transgressions from you" (Psalm 103:12). I redeem your life from the pit and crown you with love and compassion (Psalm 103:4).

"You were by nature objects of wrath. But because of my great love for you, I, who am rich in mercy, made you alive with Christ even when you were dead in transgressions - it is by grace you have been saved. And I raised you up with Christ and seated you with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages I might show the incomparable riches of my grace, expressed in my kindness to you in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:3 - 8).

Anyone who loves my Son, I will love and make my home in him or her (John 14:23). My love for you is so great and lavish that you are called children of God (John 1:12, 1 John 3:1). I elevate you to the status of sons and daughters of God.

I gave my people in the Old Testament the promise: though a mother may forget her baby and have no compassion on the child she has borne, I will not forget you (Isaiah 49:15). I give you the same promise: “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31:6, Hebrews 13:5). “I will not leave you as orphans” (John 14:18).

My love for you endures forever (Psalm 107:1; Jeremiah 33:11). It’s constant. It doesn’t stop. It lasts and lasts and lasts. It isn’t like the morning mist or early dew that vanishes when things get hot (Hosea 6:4). My love isn’t going to run away at the first sign of trouble, when things get difficult. I will stay by your side. I love you through thick and thin, when all others walk away or run away. I will still love you.

If you want to know how much I love you... not this much (finger and thumb almost touching). Not this much (hands about a foot apart). But...this...much (hands stretched out as far as possible like Christ on the cross).

One of the new Christmas songs I’ve grown quite attached to is Wonderful (by Cain). It speaks of God reaching to us through Jesus: “Almighty in a manger. Told us He’d be no stranger, To all our sorrow, All the hurt we’ll ever know. So let these gifts remind us, How Love came down to find us. Wonder of the ages. The life, the truth, the way. He is our Wonderful Counselor, The Mighty God, The Prince of Peace, Who’s strong enough to carry me. Immanuel, God with us. The One who’s love will never end. Oh, Jesus you can make this season Wonderful.”

Our greatest need was and is to experience the love of God. The world’s greatest need is the love of God. We are to share the love we’ve received from God with others – with those who have placed their personal trust and confidence in Jesus to pay the penalty for the moral crimes they’ve committed against God and those who haven’t. We are to help them know how they can be rightly related to God, so all these promises of God’s love can be theirs.

Love was born in the manger of Bethlehem that night. Love came down from heaven, came as the Breath of heaven, as Immanuel. Through him God is with you now. He will be with you next year. He will be with you forever. He’s the one who can hold you together.

The renowned author and thinker C.S. Lewis helps us understand God’s motivation. “God loves us NOT because we’re lovable, but because He is love. Not because He needs to receive, but because He delights to give.”

How will you, how will I, respond to God’s love? Will we give it a passing acknowledgment like we do the cars that zip by us on the highway? Will we allow it into our lives based on our requirements and our time frame, maybe on a trial basis? Will we long for it, welcome it, receive it, embrace it and unreservedly open ourselves up to it? Will we long for, welcome, receive, embrace and unreservedly open ourselves to Him?

God. . . loves. . . me.