

**ADVENT SERMON SERIES
FROM HEAVEN ABOVE
(4) THE GIFT OF LOVE**

Isaiah 54:7-10

1 John 4:7-11

John 3:13-17

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(with material from Dean Nadasdy and Arden Mead, used by permission)

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SCRIPTURE

⁷ For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. ⁸ In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the LORD, your Redeemer. ⁹ This is like the days of Noah to me: Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you. ¹⁰ For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you (Isaiah 54:7-10 NRSV).

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:7-11 NRSV).

¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him (John 3:13-17 NRSV).

MESSAGE

Gift giving at Christmas can be problematic. When it comes time for people to open the

presents you got for them you wonder what they will say. What you hope you don't hear are responses like these: "You shouldn't have!" which really means, "I wish you wouldn't have!" Or "Isn't this a surprise!" Or "Are you sure this is for me?" which really means, "This is totally inappropriate!" Or worse, "I'm a Size Medium, not an Extra Large!" Everyone, after all, is not a gracious gift recipient, nor is everyone a skilled gift giver.

It is that way with the gift of love sometimes. Not everyone receives it well in every circumstance. Adoptive parents can tell you that sometimes their adopted child has a difficult time receiving their love. There can be a turning aside or even a push back from a child who cannot understand herself why she rejects her parent's expressions of love. Or consider how difficult it is to receive a gift from someone for whom we've not purchased a gift in return.

One of the key reasons why we have such difficulty giving and receiving gifts is because we don't really understand the first Christmas gift. We need to realize that until we are overcome by the love of God in sending his one and only Son for us, our love toward God and others will be shallow at best. The essence of Christianity is not so much that we love God and others but that God loves us enough to send and sacrifice his Son, Jesus Christ. This gets to the heart of our Trinitarian faith. It captures the depth of relationships within the very nature of God and the essence of the sacrifice God was willing to make for us. To say that God "sent His Son" affirms not only the relational nature of our Triune God but also the reality of the essence of God being love (1 John 4:8).

Notice that John says:

"In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us" (1 Jn 4:10).

Simply loving God and our neighbor doesn't constitute all of Christianity. It may be the summary of the law (Mt 22: 34-40), but it is not Christianity at its deepest. It misses the crucial motivation we have for loving God and others – our having received God's love in Jesus. We don't give love because it's the right thing to do or the human thing to do. We give love because God in Jesus Christ has overwhelmed us with his love. We love God and others because God's loving gift of Jesus continues to transform us. We love because God first gave us love (1 John 4:7).

Still, it's not easy to get past the tree and the presents.

Nancy Dugan was nearly four as Christmas drew near. The parents and four older children all had tried to prepare Nancy for Christmas by talking with her about the real meaning of Christmas and why the family celebrated it. Nancy had a wonderful Christmas with a lot

of presents and toys. A few days later, Nancy was talking with her older sister about what a great Christmas she had, and said, "I sure hope Joseph and Mary have another baby."

It is not hard to misunderstand what Christmas is, especially if you are new at it. Lights, presents, and decorations are easier to grasp than abstract concepts of "peace on earth, good will to others." My granddaughter, Naomi, upon seeing her first ever Christmas tree erected in her home, reached for a branch and shook it like it was a hand and said, "Nice to meet you Christmas!"

But perhaps Christmas is more concrete and real than we think it is. It is as real as a baby. But this baby did not stay a baby. He grew up and became a man.

From the Bible we know how the story continues. We know of our Lord's baptism, his temptation in the wilderness, his calling of the disciples and training them so that they could some day forward the Message of Love to us. We know of our Lord's preaching and teaching, his healing and helping, his confrontation with those who opposed him. His single-minded determination to fulfill the Father's will for the redemption of the world ... Palm Sunday ... the upper room ... Gethsemane ... the high priest's courtroom, and then Pontius Pilate's ... the whipping post ... the way of sorrows ... and the gory details of his crucifixion ... and what it all means for our salvation, our forgiveness, our hope of paradise at last.

He could die like that for us because he was born like this for us. That is where the story goes. The body once laid in a manger was laid at last in a tomb ... and raised from it on the third day.

What began on Christmas with a baby's cry carries on into eternity--all eternity--of which we can be a part ... made possible by God's gift of love at Christmas ... and then beyond.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16 KJV).