

## Sermon for Dec. 19, 2010 – “Christmas Love”

Text: Isaiah 7:10-16; 1 Corinthians 13; Matthew 1:18-25

For the last three weeks – as we’ve lit our Advent wreath candles – we’ve been looking at the hope, the peace, and the joy that God grants us through Christ Jesus. Today is the 4<sup>th</sup> and final Sunday of Advent and because we light the fourth candle, the candle of love – we call today the Sunday of Love. The scriptures we’ve heard speak of God’s love for us. They speak of how he promised us through the prophet Isaiah that a virgin would conceive and bear a son whose name would be known as “Emmanuel” – “God with Us” – and how this special child would save and deliver his people. The gospel lesson tells us of how that promise came true through the child of Mary. It tells of how Joseph – out of his love for God and his obedience to God’s word – took Mary for his wife and did all that the angel commanded him to do...thereby giving a home and family to the one who was to be called Jesus, Emmanuel.

I came across an interesting Advent-version of the fairy tale “The Fisherman and His Wife” by the Brothers’ Grimm. Today as we await the birth of Jesus, God’s gift of love to us, I want to share it with you.

Once upon a time there lived a fisherman and his wife. Their home was a humble two roomed cottage with a tiny garden, an outhouse, and a well. Every day the fisherman would go out in his little boat and in the evening bring home his catch, sometimes good, sometimes poor. This was their livelihood. But the fisherman’s wife was discontented. “Why should I have to live in this hovel? Is it too much to expect a decent home with indoor plumbing, water, electricity and a kitchen? I wish I were a fine and proper lady.” Her continual complaining made the fisherman quite miserable. One day, something happened which changed their lives.

The man caught a strange and beautiful fish which startled him by speaking. “Please throw me back into the sea and I’ll grant whatever you wish.” The fisherman thought a bit and then replied, “So be it. I wish my wife was a fine and proper lady and lived in a decent house with indoor plumbing, water, electricity and a kitchen.” When he returned that evening he found that his wish had been granted, and his wife was very pleased. But as the months passed she began to grumble again, “Is it too much to expect something better than this dinky little house? I wish I was a Duchess, with a mansion and servants and a carriage. Why did you ask for so little? I’m sure the fish meant us to do better than this.”

Driven by her complaints and nagging, the fisherman tried to contact the fish again and rowed his boat to the spot. No sooner had he called than the fish appeared and agreed to his request. But the duchess was still not satisfied. Within a month she was grumbling and complaining again. “I wish I was a queen, go and see your fish again.” And so he did.

Life in the palace was luxurious, but the fisherman’s wife, now a queen, wasn’t content for long. “What I really want,” she said, “is to be God. I’m sure your fish will understand that this is what I wanted all along.” When the man returned from his last visit to his fishy friend, he found no palace on the shore, no mansion, not a house. Not even his little old cottage was there. But then he heard crying, and noticing a cave in the nearby cliff face, he went closer. Inside, it was fashioned into a rough stable. It smelled absolutely awful. There were a few oxen, several sheep, and a donkey. And in the manger, a little baby lay crying. The fisherman’s wife had her wish.

The wife in our rewrite of the story had, of course, forgotten what God is like in this world, in human flesh. She'd forgotten about Christmas, Easter and everything in between. She'd forgotten about the manger and the cross. She'd forgotten that our God is a God who comes and who identifies with his people, and especially with the poorest and the most humble of people. It's so easy to forget what it cost Jesus to come to earth as one of us. The Almighty God, Creator and King of the Universe, gave up his heavenly throne. He gave up being worshipped and adored by angels and saints, in order to come to us and to give us heaven.

I've heard that there was a painter who upset many people by painting a picture of the baby Jesus in the manger, with the roof beams of the stable throwing the shadow of a cross over his face. I forget the details – the artist and so forth – but I found a few images that I want to share:



I suppose I can understand why people might be upset by these. But as I understand the gospel, my feeling – no matter how much we'd rather *not* be reminded of Easter at Christmas-time – is that these images are appropriate. This time of year millions around the globe decorate trees and homes in celebration of the birth of their savior – a savior whose death on a wooden cross will also be memorialized come spring. Baby Jesus will be tucked into His crib under Christmas trees sparkling with ornaments.

Isn't it interesting that both His birth and death are remembered with such similar structures, a tree for His birth, a cross made from a tree for His death – which He promised was not really death, but eternal life? While his birth into earthly life is celebrated with glitter and gold, today his birth into spiritual life is mourned and symbolized by the cross. Early Christian crosses were decorated with flowers and wreaths like our modern Christmas trees, to commemorate the joys of eternal life. In modern times, the cross is associated with suffering and dying but – like the Christmas tree – it's also about sustenance and being reborn, and says something about how to live our lives each moment.

God was born as a baby in Bethlehem, knowing full well that the cross would follow as surely as night follows day. So, while the notion that Jesus was “born to die,” is something that's been a matter of scholarly debate for a long time – at the same time, what is unquestionably true is that **“Greater love has no one than this – that they lay down their life for their friends.”** This is the love of Christmas.

God laid aside his throne and – in Jesus – became one of us, like us in every way. And being one of us, He further humbled himself, giving His life for us. In the face of this incredible and beautiful and sobering news there can be only one response: love. To love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength; and to love one another, in the way that he loves us. God's love is the most important part of the Christmas story.

Why? Because it's the love of God that brings us all the hope, all the peace, all the joy that we'll ever need. And it's our love for one another in Christ's name that makes Christmas worthwhile.

Our second reading this morning was 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13. I'm sure most of you are familiar with and how it speaks of love. It's read at a lot of weddings. There's a paraphrase by an unknown author and – like the fairy tale I shared with you earlier – it was written especially for Advent. And so, as we finish our preparations for Christmas – less than a week away now – listen to the words of the Apostle Paul concerning love in a fresh way...

If I decorate my house perfectly with candles, wreaths, plaid bows, strands of twinkling lights and garland, but do not show love to my family...I'm just another decorator.

If I slave away in the kitchen, baking dozens of Christmas cookies, preparing gourmet meals and arranging a beautifully adorned table at mealtime, but do not show love to my family...I'm just another cook.

If I work at the soup kitchen, carol in the nursing home and give all that I have to charity, but do not show love to my family...I've gained absolutely nothing.

If I trim the tree with shiny tinsel and colorful ornaments; if I deck the halls with boughs of holly, and attend a myriad of holiday parties and sing in the choir every week but do not focus on Christ...I've missed the point entirely.

Love stops cooking to hug the child.

Love sets aside decorating to kiss the spouse.

Love is kind...even though it's stressed and tired.

Love doesn't envy another's home that has coordinated Christmas china and table linens.

Love doesn't yell at the kids or tell family members to get out of the way.

Love doesn't give only to those who are able to give in return but rejoices in giving to those who can't.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.

Video games will break, cell phones will become obsolete, pearl necklaces will be lost, golf clubs will rust – but the gift of love will endure. Indeed, that's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown – the gift of love. A love like no other.

Into a world of strength and pride...a child is born...weak and humble, having no power – except that power which alone can conquer all others...love. Such was – and is – Christmas.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Thanks be to God. Amen.