

## Truly He Taught Us To Love One Another

Part of the "The Thrill of Hope" Advent Sermon Series

Isaiah 7:10-15

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A few of you have noticed that my sermons this Advent are all titled with lines from the hymn *O Holy Night*. The first week was "The Thrill of Hope." Monday's service of the Longest Night will be "Fall On Your Knees." Christmas Eve's sermon will be titled "The Soul Felt Its Worth." Matt McCall has arranged Lessons and Carols on the 26th around the line "Chains Shall He Break." One of our online worshippers who lives far beyond the borders of South Carolina sent me a note wanting to know if we planned it that way.

I couldn't quite decide how to interpret that question — if they were asking because they thought maybe cleverness came so naturally to me, and so often, that by now it just happened even without my noticing, or if they were asking because they could only presume that anything clever had to have happened by sheer accident. For the record, yes, we planned it that way.

We planned this week's title, too — "Truly He Taught Us To Love One Another." After all, in our Advent wreath, we lit the candle of love today. The first Advent wreath appeared in Germany in 1839. A Lutheran minister working at a mission for children created a wreath out of the wheel of a cart and placed 20 small red candles and 4 large white candles inside the ring. Red candles were lit on weekdays and white candles were lit on Sundays. He adapted it from a Scandinavian practice that helped citizens remember that the long winters would come to an end, that the light would return. We use evergreens and

liturgical colors no, but the purpose is still the same: to remind us that the light will return.

That was the purpose behind Isaiah's words, too. This is one of those passages where it helps to know a little about what happens right beforehand. Ahaz was the grandson of Judah's King Uzziah. During his reign, leaders of other lands were becoming allies and growing in strength. Ahaz's people were afraid — scripture says "the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind." And so God told Isaiah to go talk to Ahaz and reassure him, telling him to be careful and calm, and not to be afraid. "Do not lose heart," God said. "The worst you are imagining will not come to pass, I promise." And then God says, "You have to trust me. If you do stand firm in faith, you will not stand at all."

Then we pick up with our reading for today. God continues to speak to Ahaz through Isaiah, saying, "Trust me. You have to trust me. Please, trust me. Ask me for a sign. Ask me for a sign that is as deep as the grave or as high as heaven." And Ahaz, bless his heart, says, "Oh, no. No, I could never do that. I won't do that. I will not test God." This is when Isaiah stops speaking for God, and starts speaking for himself. You can tell the prophet is at the end of his rope, because the summary of his speech is this: "Knock it off. Stop it. Forget this false piety. Because really, what you're saying, is that you don't trust God. You're afraid to ask for a sign because you're worried one might not appear. Get over it," Isaiah says. "If God says God will send a sign, God will send a sign,

whether you think you want one or not. That sign will be a baby, born to a young woman, named Immanuel, God With Us. And before that baby is more than a few years old, the kingdoms that threaten you will be no more, because that is God's promise — that threats and war and violence will come to an end. So trust, that, won't you? Trust it."

If I've made it sound like Isaiah has a little bit of an attitude, well, I suspect he does. It's hard to try and convince people to do the good and faithful thing, especially when they persist in doing otherwise. But remember — at that moment, when he speaks with a bit of sharpness, Isaiah is speaking for himself. When he is speaking the Word of the Lord, his words are of a different tenor. "Ask me for a sign," God says. "Ask me, because I know that will help you. And that's what I'm here for. I'm here to help you and heal you, to save you and redeem you, to love you and lead you."

That is the beauty of God's love. God's love knows what we need even before we do. God's love offers in abundance what we are too afraid to even ask about. God's love meets us where we are and makes do with who we are. "I'll send you sign," God says. And there is no greater sign of of God's love than a baby born and named Immanuel.

Christmas is the celebration of the most magnificent love the world has ever known. It is, for me, as I understand it, the most amazing miracle of our entire story of faith. It is also the most mundane, and perhaps even profane, moment of our faith. For God's love does not come to earth to reside in principalities or powers, but to fuss and gurgle and coo and cry in a helpless infant. God's love does not come to earth with a crack of thunder and all eyes watching, with pomp and circumstance. God's love comes delivered through body and blood under cover of night, while the rest of the world was completely oblivious. It is my most fervent prayer that we will not forget that this Christmas, or any other. Because when the

bottom is falling out, and we feel all alone and like hope is lost and all is forsaken, when we are overwhelmed by the brokenness of the world, we tend to think that only an equally overwhelming display of beauty can do any good. What a tragedy it would be, what an affront to Christmas it would be, if we were to believe that lie.

The Hebrew word Isaiah uses to speak of divine signs is used throughout scripture within both miraculous and mundane contexts. In Exodus 4, the same word for "sign" is used when we are told of Moses' staff turning into a snake. Thanks be to God, that is not something that happens naturally. But then in Judges 6, the same word is used when Gideon asks a messenger for a sign to prove it is really God's message that he brings. The sign Gideon asks for? Stay until I can go into my house and prepare some food for you, he says. That sign could not be more commonplace: to sit and wait, something that happens all the time, every day. Whether a sign is marvelous or ordinary, what it does is point to God, and help us see God alive and well in the world a little more clearly.

A while back, I shared a favorite poem with a friend. Just a few days ago, she shared it back with me, bringing it to memory in a new way. It is titled *Small Kindnesses*, and it is written by Danish Lameris:

*I've been thinking about the way, when you walk / down a crowded aisle, people pull in their legs / to let you by. Or how strangers still say "bless you" / when someone sneezes, a leftover / from the Bubonic plague. "Don't die," we are saying. / And sometimes, when you spill lemons / from your grocery bag, someone else will help you / pick them up. Mostly, we don't want to harm each other. / We want to be handed our cup of coffee hot, / and to say thank you to the person handling it. To smile / at them and ask for them to smile back. For the waitress / to call us honey when she sets down the bowl of clam chowder, / and for*

*the driver in the red pick-up truck to let us pass./ We have so little of each other, now. So far / from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange. / What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these / fleeting temples we make together when we say, "Here, have my seat," "Go ahead - you first," "I like your hat."*

That God's love comes to us at Christmas is astonishing beyond all expectation. But the way God's love comes to us is as base and ordinary as it could possibly be. And that assures us that love does not have to be heroic. There are opportunities to show love, God's love, all around us, every day.

There will always be stories that sound like the plot of Hallmark movie — CEOs at the top of her game who quit in order lead a nonprofit focusing on alleviating hunger. The priest who notices the kids on the street and takes them into his home to raise as his own. The activist who puts their body on the line in the name of justice and who refuses to be quiet. There will always be stories like that, and if and when those moments present themselves to you, I hope and pray you will seize them. Far more common, though, are the opportunities to show God's love through our daily actions. It doesn't sound like much, I know. But one of the miracles of Christmas is that "not much" really can become everything.

So be patient with your child as they retie their shoe for the 9th time. Serve a meal at Transitions or the Washington Street Soup Cellar. Hand a granola bar and a pair of new socks to the gentleman holding up a sign on the street corner. Send a Christmas card to someone who hardly ever gets out anymore. Take Spanish classes here at the church so you can talk with someone in their first language. Say hello. Ask how someone is doing and wait around to hear a real answer. Allow people to see God's love in you through those small moments. Because that will increase the

likelihood that they will notice God's love in the bigger moments some other time.

The big, miraculous, incarnation sized miracles — those need to come from God's hand. The small, everyday, manger sized miracles — those can come from our own.

*We have so little of each other, now. So far / from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange. / What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these / fleeting temples we make together when we say, "Here, have my seat," "Go ahead - you first," "I like your hat."*

Truly he taught us to love one another. And no act of love is too small.