

# Sermon

## “For Us and for Our Salvation — Love Came Down”

A Sermon for First Presbyterian Church

Tuesday, December 24, 2019

Christmas Eve

## Prayer for Illumination

On a hill in a land far away and several thousand years ago - the stars shone and the quiet bleating of sheep was interrupted by the arrival of your messengers, Lord. There was NEWS!

You were among us — and you could be found by those curious enough to search for you.

You who are the Word become flesh - born too small to speak a discernible word.

You who are the light of life — were born in the humble surroundings of a peasant’s home, with simple accommodations and only feeble light.

You who are Prince of Peace, and King of Kings — arriving by way of a young woman, born out of wedlock and soon to be heading to Egypt as a refugee of Herod’s murderous rage.

It is an odd arrival for one we claim to be Lord of Lords, and when we are not trying to domesticate it, we know the absurdity of your coming to save the world in the form of one who would need his diaper changed.

So, help us to hear this tale again. To really hear it at a depth that causes us to pause and scratch our head and ponder in our hearts what, on earth you were thinking to come like that. And for our part we will listen not just with our ears but with the ears of our hearts too.

*Luke 2:1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped*

*him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

*Luke 2:8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”*

*Luke 2:15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

- I. Tonight we linger over the story of the Nativity**
  - A. A story of a baby whose coming was both miracle and surprise.**
  - B. What we say about that baby is that in that infant**
    - 1. Born to poor parents - who had to use the pauper’s sacrifice when they presented him in the Temple on his eighth day:**

*Luke 2:22 When the time came for their purification according to the*

*law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), 24 and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”*

**This is the alternative offered for poor people who could not sacrifice a lamb which is what the law required**

*[the mother] shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering. 7 He shall offer it before the LORD, and make atonement on her behalf; then she shall be clean from her flow of blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, male or female. 8 If she cannot afford a sheep, she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement on her behalf, and she shall be clean.*

**C. We say that he was born into a simple place where people and their livestock lived together. Indeed his crib is a depression into which feed for the livestock normally was put.**

**D. We say that this poor baby, given to humble people of simple means was the incarnation of God’s love.**

**E. We confess that the love of God is meant to redeem us from lives bereft of love.**

**II. So we stop our holiday busyness and we ponder as did Mary the meaning of this extraordinary arrival.**

**A. Humility and Love go hand in hand.**

**1. The pathway to love as God loves is the pathway paved with acts and attitudes of humility.**

**2. The early church knew this and taught it!**

**† They taught that the twinned virtues of**

***Love and Humility* were the way to disarm the violence which permeated their world and which still permeates ours.**

**3. Our God comes not as victorious king full of pride.**

† **Love comes in the humble setting of a manger and the treasure of a mother's love for her baby.**

**4. There is no better path for us to walk if we choose to love those around us than a path of humility.**

† **Knowing that we do not know everything**  
† **Seeing that we have more than enough to do in correcting ourselves — and should probably restrain ourselves from being preoccupied with the sins and foibles of others.**

**B. Humility is a strong armor against the influence of the evil One. — from Abba Macarius of Sketis**

*From Abba Macarius (the Great) — "When Abba Macarius was returning from the marsh to his cell one day carrying some palm-leaves, he met the devil on the road with a scythe. The devil struck at him as much as he pleased, but in vain, and he said to him, 'What is your power, Marcarius, that makes me so powerless against you? All that you do, I do, too; you fast, and so do I; you keep vigil and I do not sleep at all; in one thing only do you beat me.' Abba Marcarius asked what it was. The devil said, 'Your humility. Because of that I can do nothing against you.'"*

**C. Humility is pursued in the service of learning to love as God loves.**

† **My friend and spiritual mentor - Ben Johnson**

\*     **A man of extraordinary gifts - and  
humility too**

from Living Before God, by Ben Campbell Johnson:

Love, our lifelong assignment:

“I have but one purpose for coming into you and remaining as constant presence...to teach you to love. You do not know love apart from me, loving is what I teach. I do not make a recluse of you, because you learn love only in relationships. You learn love in all the places that your ego can become deflated by the actions of another, in relationships when you are slighted or misunderstood, in disappointment, and in conflict. I do not expect you to learn how to love instantly; it is a life-long assignment.

Your perspective on love will change as you begin to acknowledge my presence in you. I will show you the length of love, how it has its beginning in eternity and like an unbroken thread weaves its way through the unfolding story of history; and it stretches into the future until the future has dissolved into eternity before you.”

**D. I never knew Brother Carlo Carretto but he is a literary mentor.**

*“ . . . I repeat St. Augustine’s words: ‘Love and do as you will.’ Don’t worry about what you ought to do. Worry about loving. Don’t interrogate heaven repeatedly and uselessly saying, ‘What course of action should I pursue?’ Concentrate on loving instead.” p.23 Carlo*

*That evening I had seen old Kada trembling with cold. It seems strange to speak of cold in the desert, but it is so; in fact the Sahara is often called "a cold country where it is very hot in the sun." The sun had gone down and Kada was shivering. I had the idea of giving him one of the blankets I had with me, an essential part of my gness; but I put the thought out of my mind. I thought of the night and I knew that I, too, would shiver. The little charity that was in me made me think again, though reasoning that my skin wasn't worth more than his and that I had best give him one of the blankets. Even if I shivered a little that was the least a Little Brother could do.*

*When I left the village the blankets were still on the jeep; and now they were giving me a bad conscience. (How long must I be under this rock?) "Until you are capable of an act of perfect love." pp. 3-6 Letters from the Desert*

### **III. Each year we return to this moment in the story of God with us.**

**A. We circle back around to the odd entry which god makes into our world and we ask — how shall I respond?**

**B. In humility and in love is the answer.**

*"Love is ... the meeting-point between heaven and earth, between God and humanity." p.23 Letters from the Desert*

**C. So let us go from this place more loving than when we arrived and let go to follow the one who came love to save us.**