

Love – Everlasting Father

Series: The Lights of Christmas: Finding Hope, Peace, Joy, Love, and Christ
Isaiah 9:2-7; 1 John 4:7-12
December 24, 2017

Thanks again for being here this morning, and thank you to those of you who have been praying for me this week. I got Myra's cold starting on Monday, and as it always does with me, it went straight to my chest. Thursday's doctor's appointment confirmed what I already knew: acute bronchitis. Then, all of a sudden Friday afternoon, my coughing decreased significantly. I have only one explanation: the power of prayer. So thank you for that.

It's funny how infectious a cold can be. Myra started getting sick last Saturday afternoon. As soon as I realized that, I tried to stay away from her, but alas, I had evidently already been infected.

Some infections are very hard to fight. Some infections are deadly once they get inside of your blood stream, because they begin to take over and destroy healthy cells, causing your body not to function the way it is intended. In fact, in an infection, the infecting organism seeks to utilize the host's resources to multiply, usually at the expense of the host.

During this Advent season, we have been studying the words that the Advent candles represent. And we are doing so through the wonderful Christmas passage found in Isaiah 9. I invite you to turn in your bulletin to page 5. Let me read Isaiah 9:2,6-7 for you:

The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine... For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His government and its peace will never end. He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David for all eternity. The passionate commitment of the LORD of Heaven's Armies will make this happen!

Today, we lit the 4th candle on the wreath, the candle of love, and this morning, I want to talk to you about infection, but not about bodily infections like a cold. This morning I am going to share with you about infectious love because the baby born in that manger is our Everlasting Father.

You see, the things we love have a way of infecting our very souls much in the same way that viruses and bacteria infect our bodies. However, the consequences of the things we love are much more long lasting than an earthly infection – they are of eternal consequence and significance.

I want to read from 1 John 4:7-12 this morning. You can follow along on page 5 in your bulletin.

Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love. God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins. Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love

*each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us.*¹

The Apostle John wrote this passage. He was by all accounts one of the closest to Jesus in His ministry. He, along with his brother James and Peter, witnessed several special moments with Jesus, including the Transfiguration. John was sitting in the place of honor beside Jesus, the host, during the Last Supper. It was John, and only John of all the disciples, that stayed with Jesus all the way to Golgotha, His death and burial. It was John with Peter who ran to the empty tomb on Easter Sunday morning. Following Jesus' ascension, it was John who welcomed Jesus' mother Mary into his household for the rest of her life.

So if Jesus' main message was one of love, John definitely picked it up. You've heard of the Love Chapter in 1 Corinthians 13. Well, one could easily say that 1 John is the Love Book – not Love Boat – but Love Book. And our passage today tells us several things about the infectious love that came to Bethlehem.

First, Love has its origin in God.

1 John 4:7 says:

*Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God.*²

It is from the God who is love that all love takes its source. Someone has said, "Human love is a reflection of something in the divine nature itself." We are never nearer to God than when we love. Clement of Alexandria said in a startling phrase that the real Christian "practices being God", and that means loving.

You and I are made in the image and the likeness of God.³ God is love and, therefore, to be like God and be what we are meant to be, we must also love.

Second, Love has a double relationship to God.

It is only by knowing God that we learn to love, and it is only by loving that we learn to know God.

1 John 4:7-8 reads:

*Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.*⁴

John says, "God is love," but what does the world say? It says, "Love is God." Our world, with its shallow and selfish view of love, has turned these words around and contaminated our understanding of love. The world thinks that love is what makes a person feel good, and that it is all right to sacrifice moral principles and others' rights in order to obtain such "love." But that isn't real love; it is the exact opposite – selfishness. And God is not that kind of "love." Real love is like God, who is holy, just, and perfect. If we truly know God, we will love as he does.⁵

Love comes from God, and love leads to God.

Third, it is by love that God is known.

1 John 4:12 tells us:

¹ 1 John 4:7-12 (NLT)

² 1 John 4:7a (NLT)

³ See Genesis 1:26

⁴ 1 John 4:7b-8 (NLT)

⁵ Life Application Study Bible, 1 John 4:8

*No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us.*⁶

We cannot see God, because He is spirit; what we can see is His effect. We cannot see the wind, but we can see what it can do. We cannot see electricity, but we can see the effect it produces. The effect of God is love. It is when God comes into a person that he or she is clothed with the love of God and the love for others. God is known by His effect on that person.

Finally, God's love is demonstrated in Jesus Christ.

1 John 4:9 says,

*God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him.*⁷

When we look at the manger scene, when we look at baby Jesus, we see two things about the love of God. We see that it is a love which holds nothing back. God was prepared to give his only Son and make a sacrifice beyond which no sacrifice can possibly go in his love for us. And this love of God is a totally undeserved love. You have done nothing to deserve it. I don't care if you are Mother Theresa or Billy Graham or have been voted Teacher of the Year, or Employee of the Year, or Customer of the Year every year of your life; you did not deserve God's love. But love is what you get from God

How easy it is to get so caught up in the madness of Christmas that we would forget what Christmas is even about. Christmas is about the coming of Messiah – the promised one of God – who would save not only His own people but the entire world through His sacrifice at the Cross. It is about love that is infectious.

Christina Rossetti was born in London, England in 1830, the youngest child of poet and political refugees from Italy. The literary arts were quite evident in the family; her siblings became influential artists, poets, and writers. Christina dictated her first story to her mother before she had learned to write.

In the 1840s, her family faced severe financial difficulties due to the deterioration of her father's physical and mental health. In 1843, he was diagnosed with persistent bronchitis, possibly tuberculosis, and faced losing his sight. He gave up his teaching post at King's College and though he lived another 11 years, he suffered from depression and was never physically well again. Rossetti's mother began teaching to keep the family out of poverty, and with her siblings out of the house, Christina's home life became one of increasing isolation. When she was 14, she suffered a nervous breakdown and left school. Bouts of depression and related illness followed. But her growing Christian faith and devotion began to play a major role in her life.

Christina began writing at the age of 12 and became a famous poet, as famous as Elizabeth Barrett Browning. She also wrote two poems that have become Christmas carols. "In the Bleak Midwinter", written in 1872, paints a vivid picture of an unwelcoming and desolate landscape – a symbolic representation of the state of the world encountered by the incarnate God.

*In the bleak mid-winter, Frosty wind made moan;
Earth stood hard as iron, Water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, Snow on snow,*

⁶ 1 John 4:12 (NLT)

⁷ 1 John 4:9 (NLT)

*In the bleak mid-winter, Long ago.*⁸

That's an adept description of the world without the real love that comes from our Heavenly Father. Christina's second carol, found in her diary at Christmas of 1885, tells of what happens when love appears: it presents an inviting image of incarnate God of love descending to Earth, heralded by star and angels. Indeed, if one includes the word "lovely," "Love" is mentioned 12 times in three short stanzas. I invite you to stand as we sing Christina's beautiful poem of love coming down at Christmas. #242.

⁸ UM Hymnal #221