

24 December 2015
Eve of the Nativity of Our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Love Story”

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

How do you know that God loves you? Because sometimes it may seem as if He doesn't; or at least, not very much. When your life gets turned upside down. When tragedy strikes. When each day you awaken to sorrow or loneliness, maybe especially during the holidays. When fears outnumber joys and worry is your daily bread. When tornadoes strike your town and take your home and maybe a loved one, as they did in the South *the day before Christmas Eve*. In the midst of such times, *how do you know, how can you be sure, that God loves you?* We heard the answer tonight: ***In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.***

Or in other words, **Jesus is born because God loves you.**

Because God didn't have to do that. There didn't have to be a Christmas. When Adam and Eve sinned, as we heard in the first reading tonight, God could have let them go their rebellious way and die in their sin. And He would have been 100% justified in doing so. They deserved it. They didn't want God and His Word and His gifts and His Paradise? *Fine. See ya.*

But God didn't do that, because He loved them. Still. He couldn't not love them. He couldn't stop loving them, though they had not returned His love. And so instead of sending them away, He promises to send someone to them: a Saviour. A satanic-head-crusher. One who would undo what they did, though they did not in any way deserve it.

That is the Saviour the prophet Isaiah then wrote about; the Saviour who comes *as a child*. ***For to us a child is born***, he says; ***to us a son is given***. . . . ***A shoot*** - a baby tree - ***will come from the stump of Jesse***. . . . And this ***little child shall lead them***. And this little child, this Son, Isaiah says, will be none other than the ***Mighty God*** Himself. The Son of God come into a world darkened by sin and death, to bring light and joy and peace. And into a world of not just *any* darkness - ***deep darkness***, Isaiah said. Your darkness and mine. That's where this child is and where He wants to be. And the deeper the darkness, the brighter will shine His love and light.

And then finally the time appointed by God to send His Son had come, and He sent the angel Gabriel to herald it. And by His Word make it so. And Mary conceives. The Son of God from eternity is now also the son of Mary in time. And that time was during the reign of *Caesar Augustus*, when *Cyrenius was governor of Syria*. The world had come a long way since Adam and Eve plunged it into sin, but God had not forgotten His promise. And when Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem for the taxation census, the child was born, *wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in a manger*, as we celebrate tonight.

That's how you know that God loves you. But not just that. We heard more, too. That *in this is [His] love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation* - the sacrifice - *for our sins*.

So it's not just that God sent His Son, but that He sent His Son to die - to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. To pay the penalty for you, instead of you, in your place. That's the love of God for you. The love of God which stopped Abraham's knife-wielding hand but would not stop His own at the cross. Abraham was willing to offer up his son, but Isaac was not the son who would bless *all the nations of the world* - that would be the Son of God and the son of Mary; the son given the name Jesus.

He didn't look the part - a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger is all the shepherds saw with their eyes. But as the angels told the shepherds, the one *born this day in the city of David is a Saviour, Christ the Lord*. And not only would all the nations of the earth be blessed in Him, but God also told Abraham, *he shall possess the gate of his enemies*.

What does that mean? What enemies are those? Men may align themselves against God, like Adam and Eve, but also like Adam and Eve, they are not God's enemies; they are not the foes the Son has come to fight and conquer - Jesus comes to save them too! All people. And us, too, when we align ourselves against God and insist on sinning.

No, the enemies here are the enemies that afflict all peoples of all times and places - the enemies of sin, death, and hell. By His death and resurrection, this child of Bethlehem would conquer the stronghold of hell, break the grip of the grave, and open heaven to sinners by the forgiveness of our sins. Jesus is now the gate-keeper, the gate-possessor, and bids us come and enter, to find our love and life, our hope and joy, in Him. For in Him - and only in Him - is there *peace on earth, good will toward men*.

So the story we heard tonight from first to last is *a love story*. Not a sappy, mushy kind of love, but a strong and determined love. The love of a strong and determined God, who wants nothing else for you but the greatest gift of all: life with Him; life in His Son, forever. A life that lasts beyond the grave and transcends the troubles of the world. A life where sin and darkness are no more.

Such a life may not seem possible; there are many skeptics, after all. Maybe even you from time to time. When we see so little love in others. When our own love grows cold, even toward God. And when the troubles and darkness - in our world and in our hearts - grows deeper. The story of Christmas *sounds* good, but sometimes seems so far away and out of reach. And it would be, were it up to us. As far as heaven is from earth.

But that's why Christmas is such good news! Christmas is the love and life of God *come down to us*. There is no darkness too deep, no trouble too threatening, no love too cold, no person too lost, no sorrow too profound for Him. For the God who came to us at Christmas is the God who is with us still, to save, speaking to us His Word and His forgiveness, washing us in His Baptism, and feeding us with His Body and Blood. These are His manglers today, where He is loving us and saving us. And we, like the shepherds, come to the one who has been made known to us.

But not only that - ***the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God***. And God bids us do the same - to glorify and praise God by loving one another, with the love and forgiveness He has given to us in His Son, and providing for one another with all that He has given us. And as you do, as Christ the Lord comes to you and lives *in* you and *through* you, you will find His light makes the darkness a little less deep, His love makes your love a little less cold, and His joy makes your sorrow a little less profound. A little glimpse of the Paradise that awaits us.

So yes, *God really does love you*. With a love greater than anything in this world and life. And we see and rejoice in that love this night. Whether you are going home tonight to an empty house or a full house or *any* house. To gifts many or few. To memories joyous or sad. To a life easy or difficult. ***Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, - your Saviour - which is Christ the Lord.***

Merry Christmas!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.