

Good morning, Cornerstone! And welcome to the fourth and final week of our advent series, “The Light has Come” as we anticipate the arrival of Christmas day. In week one Pastor Andrew encouraged us to live into Hope: embracing the certainty of God’s promised future that shapes how we live in the present. In week two, Pastor Steve showed us how Jesus’ arrival at Christmas brought us Peace with God, with each other, even in the midst of life’s troubles. And Last week Pastor Jeremy showed us that the Good News brings true Joy to all of us. And this week— “Love has Come”. To be honest, I am excited and looking forward to Christmas and all that goes with it. The girls are home, Lorraine’s mom is with us, I’m on vacation for two whole weeks. The Christmas trees have been lit and there will be turkey!!! But in the midst of whatever your Christmas might look like, whether full of joy and celebration, or perhaps with pain and grief, let’s together take the next twenty minutes or so and reflect on the fact that in Jesus, in that baby born over two thousand years ago, Love has Come.

To be specific, I would like to examine three things that Christmas teaches us about the love of God-- that God’s love is sovereign, that God’s love is sacrificial, and that God’s love is personal.

We have a theme passage for today, two short verses that we will be referring back to in each of these points. It isn’t found in the Christmas passages of Matthew or Luke, but Pastor Andrew alluded to it in his sermon in week one of our Advent series so I think we are on safe ground.

Are you ready?

If you are online, type in the chat: I’m ready! I’m ready. I was born ready!

OK. here we go: we're reading from a letter the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in the central province of what we call Turkey—a province the ancients called Galatia. Here it is Galatians chapter 4, verses 4 and 5.

Gal 4:4-5 But when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. ⁵God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children. (NLT 1996¹)

This verse introduces all three of our points. “But when the right time came”: God’s love is sovereign. “God sent his son, born of a woman, subject to the law. God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law”: God’s love is sacrificial. and “so that he could adopt us as his very own children”: God’s love is personal.

1. Christmas shows us that God’s love is Sovereign.

So we begin. **But when the right time came,**

I love that phrase because it captures in just a few words the fact that God is the God of history—one of my favourite subjects. Christmas wasn’t some random event, some unplanned thing that happened when God finally got so desperate, he didn’t know what else to do. It was in the plan from before time began. All through the Old Testament there are sign posts that point forward towards Christmas, toward Jesus, the baby that was born that day. And because I love it, and because it is so important to the Christmas story, we are going to take a quick walk through some of these verses in the Old Testament so we can see just how carefully God in his sovereignty was unfolding his plan.

¹ All scripture quotations are from the original 1996 version of the New Living Translation because that is the paper bible I will be reading from on Sunday. There have been more recent editions in 2004 and 2015 so if you are reading an NLT and the wording is a bit different, your are likely reading a newer one.

It begins, of course, with Creation where the first Man Adam and the first Woman Eve, created in a perfect garden, were led astray by the serpent and rebelled against God's authority. But God in his love was not willing to abandon them to their fates, but provided protection for them and even as he cursed the serpent, God dropped a hint that one day, a descendent of Eve would somehow overcome the serpent.

Gen 3:15 From now on, you and the woman will be enemies, and your offspring and her offspring will be enemies. He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel

It isn't much to go on, but it is a hint—one day things will get better.

Fast forward to a time about two thousand years before Jesus was born. Abraham, whose family came from Ur of the Chaldeans, in what we would call Iraq, was called by God to walk in special relationship with God. Why? So that eventually all the families of the earth will be blessed through Abraham's descendants. As we read in Gen 22:18,

Gen 22: 18 And through your descendants, all the nations of the earth will be blessed—all because you have obeyed me."

God is clarifying the picture. There will be great blessing through the line of Abraham. So our stroll through history continues. Abraham had a son named Issac, Isaac had a son Jacob whom God renamed to Israel, and God created a nation from Israel's descendants—a nation established to demonstrate God's character to a lost world. After centuries of exile in Egypt and centuries of establishing themselves in the land God promised to them, and still a thousand years before Jesus, we find the young Jewish shepherd David, whom God has chosen to be the second king of Israel. A man after God's own heart, once his kingdom is established, David tells God's prophet Nathan that he wants to build a house for God, but God has other plans—David's son will build the temple, but for David God has a promise far greater than just a building:

2 Sam 7:16 [to King David] “Your dynasty and your kingdom will continue for all time before me, and your throne will be secure forever.”

Somehow descendants of David will rule forever. A reassuring promise.

Fast forward three centuries from David to about 700 BC, when Micah, a prophet from rural Judah, blasted the urban dwellers with a message that they align their lives to God’s ways and beware of coming destruction. But I love this little detail that God drops into the midst of all of Micah’s prophecies:

Micah 5:2 But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
are only a small village in Judah.
Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you,
one whose origins are from the distant past.

So we understand that the kingly line should come from David’s descendants. We even know what town he will come from--the town of Bethlehem in the region of Ephrathah. It sounds like God’s sovereign plan is moving along nicely. But not everything comes up Coca Cola and chips. Fast forward to about 587 BC and David’s descendants are barely holding on to the throne of Judah. The Babylonian army is preparing siege ramps around Jerusalem and its siege engines are about to knock down the walls of the city and the temple built by David’s son Solomon—God’s own house. In spite of the impending doom, the Prophet Jeremiah again promises that deliverance would ultimately come from someone born into the line of David—someone who would do what is right, and who would deliver Israel.

Jer 33:15-16 At that time I will bring to the throne of David a righteous descendent, and he will do what is just and right throughout the land. In that day Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety. And their motto will be “The Lord is our Righteousness”.

Through all the ups and downs of history, God's love is unstoppable, his word will always endure and his promises are guaranteed. And the same is true of us—no matter our circumstances, God's love for us is the one thing we can count on. That doesn't mean things won't go wrong, that we won't sometimes feel abandoned. The same Jeremiah who wrote of the certainty of God's ultimate deliverance would also witness the destruction of God's chosen city and his Temple, and probably died in exile in Egypt. But God's sovereign love continued working.

And then, about 400 years before Jesus was born. Silence. God stopped speaking to his people through his prophets. But even in the four hundred silent years from the last Old Testament Prophet, Malachi, to the birth of Jesus, God was still at work preparing the world for Jesus' arrival. He raised up Alexander the Great, the King of Macedonia who went for a walk Eastward and conquered the Mediterranean basin and the near East as far as India, leaving behind a common language, Greek, which would facilitate the communication of the Gospel. And after the Greeks, the Romans. Pastor Steve talked two weeks ago about the Pax Romana—the Roman peace that allowed trade and travel to flourish and allowed the apostles to carry the message of the Gospel throughout the Western world.

When was Jesus born? When the right time came. The entire Old Testament is full of stories that point to God not abandoning his people, constant in his love, moving history toward the day when he will ultimately bring deliverance. God's love doesn't just span history, it shapes history according to his plan so that all roads lead to Jesus. God has a plan. Amen? Say it together—God has a plan. Type it into the chat: God has a plan. God's love is sovereign.

2. Christmas shows that God's love is Sacrificial.

So, we have seen that Christmas demonstrates that God's love is sovereign. But does that mean that God is a remote God, aloof from the day-to-day events here on planet earth, like some puppet master in the sky? The second part of our key passage shows that is **not** the God whom we serve. What did God do when the right time came?

Gal 4: ⁴ But when the right time came, **God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law.** ⁵ **God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law**, so that he could adopt us as his very own children. (NLT)

God's love would not allow him to stand by and allow his children to remain slaves of the law—slaves of the sin that binds us and pushes us to do wrong. We are in Advent, when we look forward to Christmas—the celebration of Jesus' birth, not Lent, when we look forward to Easter and the remembrance of Jesus' death and glorious resurrection, but I would suggest that you can't really understand Christmas without thinking a little about Easter. Christmas is good news—because of Jesus we do have Hope, and we have Peace, and we have Joy, and we have Love, but it came at a cost—not to us, but to the baby whose birthday we are celebrating.

Isaiah was another one of the great Old Testament prophets, and woven throughout his prophecies were more predictions of someone who would come to save his people, but there is a difference between what Isaiah described and much of what we have already read—Isaiah says the deliverer will not arrive as a triumphant king, but as someone who would save God's people by suffering on their behalf. And from the earliest days Christians have affirmed that Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of this suffering servant. God's love is sacrificial.

Isa 53:2 My servant grew up in the LORD's presence like a tender green shoot,
sprouting from a root in dry and sterile ground.
There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance,
nothing to attract us to him.

³ He was despised and rejected—
a man of sorrows, acquainted with bitterest grief.
We turned our backs on him and looked the other way.
He was despised, and we did not care.
⁴ Yet it was our weaknesses he carried;
it was our sorrows that weighed him down.
And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God,
a punishment for his own sins!
⁵ But he was wounded and
crushed for our sins.
He was beaten that we might have peace
He was whipped, and we were healed!

When Jesus was born a Baby at Christmas, he demonstrated once and for all that God is not indifferent to our plight. In fact, he loves us so deeply that he was willing to forego the wonders of Heaven, the throne he deserved as the sovereign king of the universe and come down to live and die among us, to allow us, his own creatures, to abuse and ultimately crucify him. When the right time came, God did not sit idly by and leave his people to suffer. He sent his son. And Jesus willingly humbled himself. Why? Because the love of God is sacrificial.

3. Christmas shows that God's love is Personal.

So the love of God is the love of the sovereign lord of all history, and it is a sacrificial love, sending his own son to save the whole world, but I have to admit that sometimes I wonder: would a God like that ever pay attention to someone like me? Does he notice me? Let's go back to our key passage:

Gal 4: ⁴ But when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. ⁵ God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, **so that he could adopt us as his very own children.**

Paul writes that the whole purpose of Jesus' mission was **so that** we could be adopted as children. It doesn't get more personal than that, but is that also what we see in the Christmas records that Matthew and Luke provide us? Yes we do! Last week Jeremy taught us that the night shift shepherds—the lowest rung on the lowest rung of society's totem pole were blessed to receive the message of great joy directly from God's angel choir. But it isn't just the shepherds—Luke's account is also full of references to common people, starting with a relatively obscure priest and his barren wife.

Luke 1:5-7: It all begins with a Jewish priest, Zechariah, who lived when Herod was king of Judea. Zechariah was a member of the priestly order of Abijah. His wife, Elizabeth, was also from the priestly line of Aaron. Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in God's eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord's commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and now they were both very old.

God sends his angel to Zechariah to let him know that not only will they have a child, but that child will be John the Baptist--the messenger who would prepare the way for the Messiah—the coming saviour. This too was according to God's plan—the prophet Malachi described John's role hundreds of years before he was born.

The story continues with Mary, a teenager from small town Israel, who would become the mother of Jesus. Her fiancé was a builder, but a righteous man—and a descendent of King David, we should note—since both Matthew are careful to point it out to us. We know how the story unfolds—the baby on whom all our hopes rested was not born in a palace, but in an animal shelter, spending his first night sleeping in a feeding trough—in the town of Bethlehem thanks to Augustus' census. But Luke keeps going, mentioning more people who aren't central to the story, but who are important enough in God's eyes not only to include them in the

scripture, but even to guide their steps. When Joseph and Mary bring baby up to Jerusalem to make the sacrifice required for a firstborn son, we meet an old man name Simeon.

Luke 2: ²⁵ At that time there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him ²⁶ and had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷ That day the Spirit led him to the Temple. So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, ²⁸ Simeon was there.

God's Holy Spirit, after centuries of relative silence, is getting busy in the events surrounding Jesus' arrival. Here he leads an elderly man to meet the saviour he had longed for over many years. And finally up walks Anna, an elderly widow and prophet who lived in the temple and who was blessed to finally see the one who would deliver Israel. (Luke 2:36-38)

Why all these extra characters in the drama? There could be lots of reasons, but one of them must be to remind us that even though Jesus came to save the whole world, God is still in the business of touching one person at a time. God's love, though vast and powerful and sovereign, was also personal that first Christmas, and remains personal to this day.

What kind of love brought the baby Jesus into the world that day? The love of a God who would move all of history to that one day, who would bring everything together in that moment when the baby first cried out. The love of a God who was a father willing to sacrifice his son, and a son willing to die so that we could be adopted as his brothers and sisters. The love of a God who would adopt barren women, aged priests, teenage girls, night shift shepherds, aged widows and working-class men to be his children.

In fact, this is the love of a God who calls each of us by name. The same God who wrote Elizabeth, Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, Simeon and Anna into the story of Christmas knows my

name, and he knows your name. Because of Jesus, because of Christmas, we are all sons and daughters of God—brothers and sisters in his great family.

So what do we do with this love? We need to accept it. We need to sit in wonder at the unimaginable depths of that love. We need to focus our eyes on Jesus, no longer a baby but now a resurrected king who will one day return and finally set everything right. That's so easy to say, especially at Christmas time, but at the very least I want us to take a moment today to find our identity not in our circumstances but in the love of this great God. Christmas is fun and its merry and its sad and it hard and its so many things, so we need to take every opportunity to remind ourselves of Jesus and his love. Myself, even though I am excited about parts of it, I actually find Christmas to be a particularly hard season. I have often wondered what it is that casts such a shadow over Christmas, but this week I came up with a theory—I think I struggle at Christmas because it demands that I do everything I am terrible at. Truly! First, there are all these social things where I get to go and feel awkward, lost, incompetent and confused. Second, it demands that we shop! I have no idea how to shop. Sure, I can buy things—I have a bunch of bits of plastic in my wallet that do that just fine, and nowadays even my phone allows me to buy stuff. But the business of thinking about who would just love that or who needs just that thing—I'm lost. Even taking vacation at Christmas can be a bit threatening—not that I am addicted to work—I'm far too lazy for that, but at least at work I feel like I know what I am supposed to do—knock of steps on the way to delivering a project. But if I am on vacation, what am I supposed to be doing? I get lost. Anyways, I don't know what your experience of Christmas is, but I believe with all my heart that we need to take a moment—preferably a lot of moments, and reflect on the love of God. So as a start, let's do that. Can we proclaim together,

“I am a beloved child of God”. If you are joining us live on the internet, go ahead and type it into the chat, or if you are with us in person, let’s all say it together, “I am a beloved child of God”. It might feel a bit strange to say it out loud, but I truly believe that our only route to experiencing Christmas as God meant it begins with choosing to believe that we are loved by God. It’s such a powerful truth.

That’s our first task—to accept and hold onto the truth that we are beloved children of God. Our second task is both the same and very different, and that is to remember that we are all beloved children of God—every single person ever born into this world no matter their colour or creed or gender or vaccination status or political affiliation or citizenship or age or socioeconomic status or anything else we can think of to label each other with. We are all beloved children of God. That’s what Christmas means—full stop. But sometimes it can be hard to hold in the front of our brains because other people can be impatient, and grumpy, and unkind, and even cruel, and judgemental and too loud and too quiet and too.... I’m not talking about me, of course, but everyone else—they can be so hard to love. So your homework this week is simple—find someone to show the love of God to. Just one person to start—try choosing someone who is a beloved child of God just like you, and show to them a piece of the huge love we have all received at Christmas. Whatever it might look like, it will be a reflection and extension of the great sovereign, sacrificial and personal love of the God of Christmas.