

## **“After All, It Is a Love Story”**

**Luke 2:1-20**

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For someone who loves Christmas and everything about it as I do, you might be somewhat surprised to hear that the Christmas sermon is one of the most difficult to preach. I know there are some here who are excited with the prospect of visiting family, either going to visit or having family coming to visit. I know for others this is not an easy time at all. It is a stressful time with too much to do. For others, it can be a depressing time, not just for those who have gone through some difficulty in the past few days, but it seems for many who have faced some sort of tragedy in their life, that tragedy is magnified at this time of the year, so it can be difficult because of this.

It can be a dark time, literally. This is the shortest day of the year—a dark time. Preaching about Christmas sometimes can be about as popular as preaching about fruit cake. Preaching? How do preaching and Christmas go together? Think about that. We say sometimes, “Don’t preach at me.” We know what that means when we hear it. Preaching is about oughts, musts, and shoulds. Preachers have a difficult time with the Good News of the Christmas story. My old friend and preaching professor, Fred Craddock, used to say, “The Christmas sermon is a great cure for the common scold.”

Preaching about Christmas. Christmas is not a time for cynics, doubters, or literalists. Christmas is a time for seekers, for dreamers, for poets. How else can one speak of angels singing, a magical star, or a miraculous birth? Christmas is a time for poetry, not prose.

Christmas is no time for religion from the neck up. Some of the most liberal theologians and intellectuals in other areas of faith suddenly become literalists when faced with the Christmas story. You’ve heard them before. Perhaps you have heard some preachers say, “You know, the angels weren’t really singing. No where in the Bible does it say the angels were singing.” It could be that literal. “There weren’t any animals in the stable, at least not in the Bible. That’s something we’ve added.” “We have the wise men in our manger scene, but we know they didn’t come for maybe a year or even two years later.”

Have you ever heard such literalism at Christmas? Angels singing,

a magical star, a miraculous birth. When we try to pick those things apart, we do what Kierkegaard said, we turn wine into water. Or what Jesus said, we strain a gnat and swallow a camel.

Christmas is not a fairy tale. The Christmas story is real. It is something that really happened. One danger we face is to make it a fairy tale. We're going to sing one of my favorite hymns, and I know one of Carol Lawson's favorite Christmas carols today: *Away in a Manger*. Do you remember a line, "The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes."

Have you ever heard cattle lowing? Cattle lowing are cattle bellowing. Would your baby, if it was asleep, if it heard that sound, not cry when it woke up, scared to death?

It is not a fairy tale, but really, is it a time for preaching? I've really struggled with this, but I read something recently that helped me a lot. I hope you will appreciate it as much as I do. This man said,

"Basically, preaching is to proclaim a Mystery before which, before whom, even our most exalted ideas turn to straw. It is also to proclaim this Mystery with a passion that ideas alone have little to do with. It is to try to put the Gospel into words not the way you would compose an essay but the way you would write a poem or a love letter—putting your heart into it, your own excitement, most of all your own life. It is to speak words that you hope may, by grace, be bearers not simply of new understanding but of new life both for the ones you are speaking but of new life both for the ones you are speaking to and also for you. Out of that life, who knows what new ideas about peace and honesty and social responsibility may come.

The writer said that preaching is a love letter. After reading this, I decided, That's it, Christmas above all is a love story! Joseph loved Mary. It's not hard to imagine, remember, Joseph was a carpenter, it's not hard to imagine Joseph going out to an olive tree and carving a heart on the tree, and writing the words, "Joseph loves Mary." Mary loved Joseph. Both of them loved Jesus, and Jesus loved the world.

Christmas above all is a love story, but it's not sentimental or mushy. It's as tender as a mother's love for a baby, yet it is as tough as . . . well, it's tough enough to meet the hopes and fears of all the years.

Some of you were present last Friday at Maxine Kirkham's service. I talked about how strange it was during this season of joy to come to the church to a funeral service, to mourn the death of one we loved. I noticed something Friday afternoon that probably even those of you who were at the service didn't notice. The figurines for the manger scene that had been in front of the communion table had been moved behind the communion table. The advent wreath had been pushed off to the side. I'm sure the custodians thought that a funeral was not a time for a manger scene or an advent wreath. A funeral or any time our hearts are broken or when our hopes are crushed, that *is* the best time for the Christmas story.

The Christmas story is above all a love story. I think above all it means this: God comes to us. God comes to us in ways we would never imagine. I know many of you have read the book, The Shack in the past few weeks. If you've read that book, you know that in the book God is a large black woman named "Papa." That's hard for some to believe. In Luke's book, God is a little brown baby named Jesus. Which is more difficult to believe?

Recently, I read a wonderful story by a man by the name of Norman Bendroth. He told the account of how he and his father went about a month before Christmas in 1965, to his uncle's and his cousin's to work on his uncle's house. They were putting siding on the house. While they were working, Norman Bendroth's father fell off a ladder. As a result of that fall, he was paralyzed from the waist down. On Christmas Eve the family was in the hospital visiting Norman's father. They were about to leave to go to the family celebration at his grandparents' house. Norman did not want to leave. He did not think it was right to leave his father. His father would not be included, but it was his father who insisted that they go.

Afterwards, they returned to the hospital and his father asked them about everything that had happened. When they told him he started to cry. Norman, who was 12 at the time, said he cried also. He said he needed someone to tell him something about the importance of Christmas, about why it was appropriate to celebrate even in the face of this horrible tragedy. He said, "So I have come up with these words that I wish someone had shared with me.

During this Christmas season, out of a stable, out of the dry, pro-

vincial hills of Bethlehem, comes a cry. It is the cry of a baby and it is the cry of God. It is the cry of every mother who has buried a child; the cry of the worker whose hands lie idle because of another layoff; the cry of the husband whose arms are empty this Christmas after 60 years of companionship; the cry of a body in the death throes of AIDS or cancer or heart disease; the cry of every human heart that has suffered.

But it is also the cry of God who says, 'Enough! Enough of blind eyes and hard hearts, enough of compensation instead of justice, enough of slander instead of truth, brute strength instead of gentle power, hunger instead of fullness!'

'The day is coming,' says the Lord, 'when I will restore the years lost to you, I will give back the withered legs carried in a wheelchair, I will fill those deaf ears with music beyond all imaging, I will satisfy those longings for you which you have wept and pummeled your pillow on 10,000 nights.'

On the longest night of the year, the word will become flesh and dwell among you. You will behold the glory and the truth of that word in Christ Jesus."

I love what Bendroth has said, but I think we can put it another way in these words of faith. The Christmas story, the love story if you will, is God saying, "Here is my heart. Worship it if you will, but if you worship it, understand that you will have to give up all of those false gods. Ignore it if you will, but if you ignore it your life will never be what it was meant to be. Kill it even, that is your choice, but if you kill it, you will kill the very best that is in you. Or, you can love it. If you love it, that means you will have to be kind to each other, you will have to care for each other, you will have to love each other. For after all the preaching and teaching and praying, after all the seeking, the serving and singing, after all, it is still a love story." Amen.