

THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS IS LOVE

Sermon preached by Martha-Jean Fitch

Advent 4 December 24, 2023

TEXT: John 3:16-17, I John 3:16-17

(show sermon bumper here)

Well, here we are on Christmas Eve! How did we get here so quickly? Boy, it always seems that Advent goes so quickly. I am assuming everyone here is ready for Christmas – you have all your shopping done and all your baking? And what about your Christmas cards? I know some of you get those cards and letters done right after Thanksgiving. But then – there are people like Greg and I who are frequently late getting those cards done. Anybody else like us? For the last few years, we have sent out New Year’s cards, which we are doing this year again.

I am one who absolutely loves getting Christmas cards. I especially love it when there is a letter or a picture inside the card.

Sending Christmas cards has been a tradition, literally since the 17th century. The very first Christmas card is said to come from 1611, sent to King James I of England from a German doctor named Michael Meier – and it looked like this. (show power point) The card is of an image of a rose and a crown. The writing all around the card, read:

“A greeting on the birthday of the Sacred King, to the most worshipful and energetic lord and most eminent James, King of Great Britain and Ireland, and Defender of the true faith, with a gesture of joyful celebration of the Birthday of the Lord, in most joy and fortune, we enter into the new auspicious year 1612.”¹

It would be another 200 years, though, before Christmas cards would be mass produced. In 1843, Sir Henry Cole and artist John Horsley designed the first card and sold them for about 8 cents a piece. *“The card had three panels. The outer two panels showed people caring for the poor and in the center panel was a family having a large Christmas dinner!”* But it wasn’t until 1915 when Hallmark came on the scene and started producing mass Christmas cards – much like this one – more people started sending Christmas cards to family and friends, as a yearly tradition. Hallmark’s motto became, “when you care enough to send the best”... and encouraged people to send their love and care through their cards to everyone on their friends and family list.

Now some 1.5 billion Christmas cards are sent every year in the United States!

Now I want you to imagine for just a moment that you received a Christmas card from God. You open the card. You can hardly wait to see the message. What do you think it would say? Would it say Merry Christmas – Happy New Year? Would it say Santa Claus is Coming to Town? I don’t think so. I think God would send a better Christmas message than those. Maybe it

would say “Peace, Love and Joy to you this season” or maybe even “Peace on Earth, Goodwill to All”.

Really, our Bible is like those Christmas cards – full of many wonderful messages from God. But I believe the best Christmas card message can be found in the Gospel of John, the third chapter, verses 16 & 17. I invite you to open up your Bibles and read along with me these words that really sum up what Christmas is all about. Imagine God sending these words to you in your Christmas card:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

What an awesome Christmas card! Not only does it express the love God has for us...but it even promises that a little gift is on its way. And that “little gift” is the baby Jesus - the best gift of all! Jesus – our Savior and our Lord! What an incredible gift of love!

And that’s the heart of Christmas! That immense love of God that comes to us unworthy sinners and redeems us. But unfortunately, our world has lost sight of that love and what the true meaning of Christmas is. It seems to me that the emphasis of Christmas has become the commercialism and the extravagant gifts that all the retailers encourage.

Have you seen those large billboards along the highway, that frequently appear right after Thanksgiving? They are from a jewelry store and says:

*What will you do for love this Christmas?
A diamond is forever.*

The picture on the billboard has a beautiful diamond ring or earrings. Well, I believe that that billboard had false information on it! A diamond is *not* forever. It can be lost or damaged. But the love of God is something that *is* forever. You can never be separated from the love of God – nothing can EVER destroy that love! This truth seems so very simple and basic - and yet is it one that our world desperately needs to capture. Every Christmas, we need to hear again this powerful message of God’s love breaking into a world that so badly needs a touch of love – love that can bring hope and joy and peace.

In the book *Christmas in Harmony* written by Phil Gulley, there’s a story of the pastor, Sam Gardner, and his wife doing all the Christmas cards to send to everyone in the church, and it seems, virtually everyone in the town. The church board had determined who was to be on the rolls of the church, and even the repairman who had been there once to repair the freezer made the cut!

At any rate, the arrangement was that Sam was to sign the inside of the card while his wife addressed the envelopes. Just as she finished addressing the very last one, she picked up one of the cards to read what Sam had written on the inside. She, of course, expected to see

something like "Merry Christmas," "Happy Holidays," "Thinking of you" and signed "Sam, Barbara, Levi and Addison."

Instead, she opened the card and read, "We love you." "We love you?!" she exclaimed! Why did you write that? Don't you think that's being overly familiar? Who all did you tell we loved them?" "Well, uh, let me see, pretty much all the cards." His wife was stunned, and questioned why he couldn't have been a bit more traditional. Exasperated, she says to her husband, "Most people open the card, read it, smile, are glad we thought of them and then they pitch it in the trash. Now you had to go tell them we loved them. It'll confuse them." "What do you mean confuse them?" Sam asked. She sighed, "Telling someone you love them changes everything."³

She was right, you know? Telling someone "I love you" changes everything, and that's exactly what God did at Christmas. At Christmas, it's as though you and I are opening a special Christmas card from God, and inside are written the words, "I love you." Signed...God.

So how does that change things? How does it change the way we think about God and ourselves and others? Does it make a difference? I believe it does.

First, knowing that God loves us so much that He sent Son to die for us **changes the way we look at God**. No longer is He some aloof Judge sitting high and lifted up on a throne – far removed from the affairs of human beings. No, we have a God who came to earth to live as we do. He came to walk side by side the common folk of earth and truly understand what life is like for us. He was tempted in every way, like we are, yet without sin. He knows what it is like to go through pain and suffering. He truly understands what we are going through.

And because He sent His only Son to the earth means He really wants to be in relationship with us. Our sin has not made Him turn away from us. Rather He saw our need and sent a Savior. He didn't wait for us to *find* Him – He came looking for us! God loves us so much. He's got a lot invested in us - His only Son's life. And He continues to pour out His love on us every day, even the days when it looks totally dark. Nothing, absolutely nothing can ever separate us from His love, as seen in Christ Jesus! Now that's an awesome Christmas gift.

That kind of love not only changes how we view God, but it also **changes how we view ourselves**. All too often the world can make you think that you are not very valuable. People can tear you down – and you can end up feeling worthless and unloved. You can also go through all sorts of trials where you feel inadequate, without any power or strength to face life. And all too often, people turn to drugs or alcohol or even inappropriate relationships to cope with life. But all of these are poor substitutes. None of them will ever completely satisfy. None of them will completely fill you with the joy and peace that comes from a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Once you know to the very core of your being how much you are loved by God, it changes everything about how you view yourself. No longer are you weak and inadequate, because God's grace is sufficient for you. You can do all things through Christ's strength in you. No longer are you a worthless person. God sent His Son for YOU. You are a very loved and treasured child of God!

The birth of Jesus changes everything! We can hold our head up high and face all sorts of obstacles and problems with the strength and power of God. We can even face death itself, knowing that Jesus came to earth to make a way for us to have eternal life in heaven with Him. That's great news – news of great joy for all people!

But it doesn't end there. The birth of Jesus changes not only how we view God and how we view ourselves...it also **changes how we view our neighbors**. If God loves us that much and has forgiven us in a mighty way --- can we continue to hold hate in our hearts for our neighbors? Can we continue to be unloving and uncaring?

Look at our second Scripture reading for today, found in I John 4. Beginning at verse 7, we read these words: *“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”*

And then look over at verse 19. It says, *“We love because He first loved us. Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”*

The birth of Jesus changes everything! Our neighbor is now our brother or sister – a person for whom Jesus died! We are called to reach out to them with that gift of love we have been given from God. We can't hold grudges and tear others down. We can't be filled with prejudice and hatred. We can't harbor ill feelings and resentments. Instead, we have to be actively seeking ways to share love with others, just like God actively sought us out to show us love.

God has written us an incredible Christmas card. It tells us how much He loves us – enough to send us His only Son to be our Savior. That's a pretty amazing gift! We can receive that gift and really let it penetrate into the depths of our souls...and it will change everything! We can have an incredible relationship with the Lord that brings hope and peace, joy, and love. And that relationship will overflow with love for our brothers and sisters. Or we can ignore the gift and not let it touch our hearts. We can yawn and say, “Oh – that's the same Christmas card I heard about last year” -- and fill our selves up with the pleasures of this world that will never really satisfy and will one day fade away. It really is a choice that is left up to us.

What will it take to let the message of God's great love for you penetrate your heart? Will you really allow that love that came down at Christmas and change you? What will you do with that love?

INVITATION:

For forty-three years, at one minute after midnight on Christmas Eve, Bert Holloway of Cambridge, England handed his wife, Ethel, a love letter. The gift is a tradition they started

when they were first married. Mrs. Holloway says she treasures all the love letters from her husband.

What a wonderful tradition! It has a message, too, for God's people. Christmas is a time when we should express our love for God, because He has expressed His love for us in the gift of His Son. Let us this Christmas express our love and gratitude to God by giving ourselves anew to Him.

You are invited to come forward today to give your heart to Christ through confessing your faith in Him. Take that step to express your love for God. It could be that you already confessed your faith to God a long time ago, but you've wandered away from serving him faithfully. Now is the time to renew your faith and make a commitment to walking with him each and every day.

Won't you come now – come and make your commitment of faith. Come to the altar now, as we stand and sing, to give your love to the Lord.

RESOURCES

¹Museum Introduction.

<https://www.cityofwoodstock.ca/en/live-and-play/museum-cc-introduction.aspx>

²Mark Adams, "Getting This Christmas Right"

https://www.pastorlife.com/members/sermon.asp?USERID=&SERMON_ID=6988

³Philip Gulley, Christmas in Harmony, October 15, 2002.