

Sermon

God with Us Brings Love

1 John 4:15-21 (ASV)

¹⁵ Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God abideth in him, and he in God.

¹⁶ And we know and have believed the love which God hath in us. God is love; and he that abideth in love abideth in God, and God abideth in him.

¹⁷ Herein is love made perfect with us, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as he is, even so are we in this world.

¹⁸ There is no fear in love: but perfect love casteth out fear, because fear hath punishment; and he that feareth is not made perfect in love.

¹⁹ We love, because he first loved us.

²⁰ If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, cannot love God whom he hath not seen.

²¹ And this commandment have we from him, that he who loveth God love his brother also.

A few years ago, the Muppets and CeeLo Green co-performed a Christmas song called “All I Need Is Love,” complete with a music video.

In true Muppets form—I don’t know how many Muppets fans we have—but if you haven’t seen it, it’s full of action and humor, and all the favorites show up—from Kermit, Fozzie, and Miss Piggy to Pepe, Gonzo and his chickens, and all the rest.

And there’s plenty of bling. CeeLo and the crew sing about all the Christmas presents they could get, fancy toys and the latest technology.

But, perhaps, ironically, at its core, the song captures the true message of Christmas.

The Muppets and CeeLo don’t want all that stuff. All they want or need for Christmas is love.

Well, maybe all of them but Miss Piggy anyway. She’s always been quite the material pig.

I’m quite sure the Muppets never set out to make any grand theological statements with their Christmas song, but the song taps into the truth that all we do need *is* love.

Today as we celebrate together the second Sunday on our Advent journey of God with Us, we are celebrating love.

When Jesus came into our world as a baby, He was the human embodiment of the gift of God’s love.

When He came as Immanuel, God with Us, He came as God incarnate, He came as love incarnate.

If you weren’t with us last week or if Advent is unfamiliar to you, let me briefly explain our journey toward Christmas.

The word *advent* means “coming” or “arrival,” and the season is marked by expectation, waiting, anticipation, and longing.

Advent is not just an extension of Christmas, it is a season that links the past, present, and future.

Advent offers us the opportunity to share in the ancient longing for the coming of the Messiah, to celebrate His birth, and to be alert for His second coming.

Advent looks back in celebration at the hope fulfilled in Jesus Christ’s coming, while at the same time looking forward in hopeful and eager anticipation to the coming of Christ’s kingdom when He returns for His people.

During Advent we wait for both, it’s an active, assured, and hopeful waiting.

And each week, we focus on a different attribute of God represented in the coming of Jesus: hope, love, joy, and peace.

Mary and Joseph’s story is a Love Story

We’ve already begun today talking about a love song. Let’s talk now about a love story.

Wow, if our culture isn’t full of both! Not just our present culture, but really the entire history of humanity.

Can you imagine the power you would have if you could harness all the creative energy that has been devoted to writing love stories and love songs throughout history?

If you start with the songs and movies and stories we know in our time and start scrolling back through history through the novels and poems and plays and epics and oral narratives, the list would go on and on and on and on.

It seems that throughout our entire history, we humans have been inspired and moved and confused and intrigued and motivated by love and trying to understand it.

Hmmm, maybe that says something about us. Maybe there's a reflection there of our origins and our Creator and our deepest longings.

God's love is woven through our very creation and existence and being. But have you ever thought about the story of Mary and Joseph as a love story? I mean, sure, you know the Christmas story. You've probably heard it many, many times before. But think about it: Mary and Joseph, a love story.

Really? Absolutely.

Imagine with me and place yourself back in the ancient, dusty days of Israel under the Roman Empire. In a small village called Nazareth lives a carpenter named Joseph.

He has noble ancestry; he's distantly related to King David himself, but he lives a humble life working with his hands as a tradesman.

He probably learned to build things from his father, who was probably a carpenter before him. Some scholars think Joseph grew up in Bethlehem, but at some point, moved to Nazareth, about seventy miles north as the crow flies.

Maybe this was so he could build his own carpentry business. Maybe he had relatives there. Maybe the town needed a new, good carpenter. We don't know for sure, but we can speculate that Joseph had probably been working long enough to establish himself as an honorable and fairly successful craftsman.

That would have made him an eligible bachelor, probably around twenty years old, who was ready to marry and establish his own family.

The younger girls of the village—or more likely their fathers—would have noticed. You have to remember that the Jewish marriage customs of the day were quite different from ours. They followed clearly defined legal guidelines and took place in three stages: the contract, the consummation, and the celebration.

First, Mary's father would have gone to Joseph to propose and arrange the marriage. A cash price, like a dowry, would be set that Joseph would pay to Mary's family, maybe along with some gifts, and a contract, called a *ketubah*, would be signed. And at that point, Joseph and Mary were married 100 percent. He was her husband. She was his wife.

Then the couple would get to know each other, more like the dating stage we're used to, minus the dinner-and-a-movie outings.

Mary would still live with her family, and at some point, in the future—maybe a year, maybe years, depending on the bride's age or other factors, Joseph would lead a procession of his friends to Mary's house, where she would be waiting with a group of her friends.

Then while everyone waited in the house, the couple would consummate their marriage. This stage two of the marriage was called the *chuppah*. And then everyone would go together and have a marriage feast to celebrate the final stage of the process.

Very different from what we're used to. And it probably sounds quite awkward to most of us in our day. You're also probably thinking, *How unromantic!*

Maybe it was. But not so fast. Just because the culture and traditions of those ancient days looked different doesn't mean that there wasn't deep love flowing between this historic couple, and possibly even romance.

Use your imaginations with me—the Bible doesn't fill in all these details, but maybe Mary and Joseph's story went a little like this:

Mary was certainly younger than Joseph. Tradition suggests that she was probably a young teenager, in that day, a marriageable age.

And the options and opportunities of her life's path would have depended greatly on her marriage and family life. So, she would have known who Joseph was, still fairly young, rugged, and strong.

Certainly, his forearms would be chiseled and his hands rough but sure. From the little bits we're told about him in the Bible, he must have been even-keeled, confident, and kind.

“Father, do you know Joseph the carpenter?” Mary might have hinted to her father.

“That Joseph is a good man, kind and honorable. He would make a good husband for our Mary,” Mary’s mother could have suggested to her husband.

For his part, Joseph would have known the young girls of the village. Their fathers were his customers. He would have built furniture for their homes. He would have crafted yokes and ploughs and shovels for their farms or wheels for their carts.

He listened as they talked about their families. He knew who was kind and fair in business and in family and social life. And maybe, just maybe, there were several local girls or families with their eye on Joseph as marriage material. Human hearts and emotions have been the same throughout history, no matter how formal or different the social mores and relational customs.

“Have you seen Mary?” Joseph might have said to a friend. “Her eyes sparkle like the sun on the Sea of Galilee.”

“I saw Joseph laughing with the little children watching outside his workshop,” Mary could have said to a sister. “The sound of his voice was musical.”

And eventually this young couple was married, bound to each other for life, with their hearts stirring and their future uncertain. Like the rest of us, they could have no way of knowing what they would truly face together in the journey of husband and wife.

But excitement must have filled them as the formalities were signed, and nervousness. *What are we getting into? And who exactly is this person I will spend the rest of my life with?*

Joseph probably carved small wooden gifts for his new wife, maybe a flower to reflect her beauty. Or a bird “because its grace reminds me of you.”

Or perhaps a small box with a valuable metal clasp where she could store small treasures or things near to her heart.

Mary might have liked to watch Joseph work, shaping and creating in his workshop, where they could talk and laugh and share moments together. She might have baked and brought him special breads or cakes that she knew were his favorites. And he certainly would have joined Mary’s family for meals and celebrations and religious festivals, sharing life with them in all of its daily twists and turns.

And with each day that passed, this young couple learned more about each other: what made each other laugh, how they handled challenges and hard days, the strengths of their personalities that shone and the imperfections where they failed, their hopes and fears and dreams for the future, how many children they hoped to have one day, what kind of home Joseph could one day build for his wife and family, how they longed for the day to come when the time was right to consummate their marriage. Each day that passed, Mary and Joseph chose love, and that love continued to deepen and grow.

So, imagine the emotional bombshell that went off when Joseph heard the news.

How could you, Mary?! How could you do this, to me, to us? I thought you loved me—like I love you. We were doing this the right way, honoring God and our families and each other and now . . . now . . . THIS!

If you have ever experienced the betrayal of adultery or been close to someone who has, you know the devastation of betrayal. The pain is visceral. The wound feels physical, like your chest has literally been blown wide open. This was the broken trust that Joseph would have felt when Mary came and told him the news.

“Joseph, I know this sounds crazy, but an angel visited me and told me I’m going to have a baby. And the angel said His name will be Jesus, and ‘He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.’ He’s the Messiah, Joseph! You have to believe me. It’s a miracle, but it’s true because . . . because . . . I’m pregnant.”

Maybe he tried to listen to those first words—an angel, a miracle, the Messiah—but all he must have felt was the weight of the word *pregnant*. Everybody knows there is only one way to get pregnant, and Joseph knew he had not been

involved. Everyone would have known he had not been involved—unless he dishonored Mary and her family and all he held to be true. And if he had, then he too would be a disgrace to all their society.

This was all too much for Joseph. Maybe he walked away in silence, broken and speechless. Maybe he shouted and stormed and sent Mary away in tears. Things did not go smoothly.

And maybe this was part of why Mary went to spend three months with her aunt Elizabeth, away from her own village in the hill country of Judea. It would buy time for Mary's family to figure out what to do, how would people ever believe this story from Mary? Could they even believe it? Maybe it would give Joseph time to accept it.

So, the lovers parted, with pain and anger and distrust swirling in and around them, and young Mary was clinging desperately to the encouraging words of an angel and a knowledge deep in her soul that for whatever reason, no matter how incredulous it sounded and how miraculous it was, God's very Son had sprung to life within her. Somehow God would make a way.

Isn't that just the kind of crisis that threatens to destroy any good love story?

Now, the exact circumstances are different from what you or I will ever face, but the feelings and emotions and relational challenges are no different at their core.

Mary and Joseph's life is a true human love story, but it is also a supernatural love story that involves you and me and every human who has walked or will ever walk this earth.

Let's dig deeper into this point and look at how it affects you and me—and how we can experience this supernatural love of God with Us through the Advent season and beyond.

God Is Love

If we were watching a movie of Mary and Joseph's love story, this would be where we pan back, drifting out of that drab and dusty Galilean village, seeing a wider and wider vision above the ancient landscape and the geographic forms we recognize as continents and oceans, and farther above the great blue ball of Earth, and still farther beyond the solar system and Milky Way Galaxy, and somehow wider still through the limits of the universe and space and light and time themselves until finally somewhere beyond the limits of physics that bind our creation there is only a presence, a supernatural, infinite presence that is love. There is only God, somehow over and within all things and present and moving within all time, including the entire history of humanity that appears as only a tiny blip.

The apostle John said it most simply and best: God is love. He wrote in 1 John 4:16,

“So, we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (ESV).

This is the nature of our God. Love in its purest form.

Love was there at the center of God's creative forces that made the universe and formed people in His image to be in relationship with Him.

Love was there even when the world fell into sin and rebellion, and despite the catastrophic consequences of humanity's fall, love was there in shepherding Adam and Eve and their family into this altered world. Even then love was making a way to restore all that had been lost.

Love forged a covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Love continually led the Israelites through relocation and resettlement, through triumph and imprisonment and exile.

As we trace throughout the Old Testament, love guided and corrected and exhorted and showed mercy to the ever-disobedient and easily distracted Israelites.

In Mary and Joseph's story, love was taking the form of humanity in the Messiah Jesus. Love is God with Us. And love would be with Mary and Joseph to care for them and provide everything they would need.

The test of any good love story is this:

Is love enough?

Is this love strong enough or deep enough or true enough to handle x , y , or z , from the trivial and annoying to the catastrophic and potentially crushing?

Yes, folks, love is enough. God is enough. And His love is faithful.

God Gives Love

Mary's journey to her cousin Elizabeth's house couldn't have been easy. The walk would have been long and hot. The road must have been lonely, and the miles must have echoed in her brain with the recent conversations: the pain and hurt in Joseph's eyes and words, the disbelief and confusion from her family, and always the hope and promise delivered by the angel.

She knew the truth, but how would everyone else see? What was going to happen to her?

But as soon as Mary arrived, she was greeted with love.

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!” Elizabeth exclaimed. ***“But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”*** (Luke 1:42–45).

Can you imagine the relief? Immediately Elizabeth, who was carrying her own miracle child, knew and confirmed to Mary that love was here, that God was here, and that everything was going to be all right.

Mary's response was overwhelming. She said, maybe sang, ***“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant”*** (Luke 1:46–48).

In the midst of Mary's human crisis, God provided just the love she needed through another person who understood and supported her. That's often the way God's love works. As we walk in His love, He knows just what we need, and He brings us support from other people around us. On the flip side, He often uses us to provide that love and support for others.

In Joseph's case, his needs were a little different. Back in Nazareth in his pain and confusion, Joseph decided he was going to divorce Mary. The pain was too much. He couldn't believe this was happening. And while legally he could have taken Mary to the courts and had her tried and potentially stoned to death, he still loved her. He couldn't do that, but he couldn't handle this breach of trust. And the law allowed him to divorce her quietly and to try not to make a public disgrace of her.

That's when, in this supernatural love story, God knew that Joseph needed some supernatural love.

So, Joseph, too, got a visit from an angel with this message: ***“Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins”*** (Matthew 1:20–21)

Notice how God knew exactly what was at the heart of Joseph's hurt: fear. And God gave Joseph the reassurance he needed to trust Mary and her love—and ultimately to trust God and His love to make a way in their amazing, unbelievable, dangerous, supernatural, and ultimately triumphant love story that was looking like nothing either one of them could have ever imagined.

Joseph chose love and trust, even though the law told him he could do otherwise. And it's a beautiful reflection of God's own choice to love and foster relationship with us. Even though our sin means death and separation from the holy, perfect God, in His nature of pure love, He chose us, even at the terrible price of His Son's life. John 3:16 tells us that it was because of love that God sent Jesus to earth to give His life for us.

The love of God with Us is God's perfect love in human form that we celebrate. And this is the love that knows exactly what we need, no matter what we are facing in this season.

Whether it's support from or restoration to another person or whether it's an encounter with the God of the miraculous that you need, God's love is with us. It is here for you. And it is making a way to accomplish God's work in your life.

As mind-blowing as it is, God's love is eternal. It's as never-ending as God Himself. It was. It is now. It will be. And He will never stop demonstrating His love in tangible ways that are both daily occurrences and history-changing events like Christ's birth.

Eventually, all things we know will come to an end at some point: the good, the bad, and life itself.

But as Andrew Peterson sings in "After the Last Tear Falls": "And in the end, the end is oceans and oceans of love and love again." Then we'll find that all of our tears have been caught in the hand of the Giver of Love.

This is the love that God with Us lived out before us, and He will hold us forever and ever and ever, just as the hopeful words of Paul;

Romans 8:38–39

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

God's Love Flows Through Us

Like any true, God-written love story, Mary and Joseph's love didn't end with themselves. It was built upon the foundation of God's perfect, supernatural love, and they trusted God and followed Him on a crazy ride, unlike anyone else's in history. And when they opened their hearts to God's love, He allowed it to flow right through them as a small current in an overwhelming ocean—and this is the same one that sweeps us up.

Mary and Joseph were in it together: the long journey to Bethlehem, the seemingly desperate night with Mary about to give birth and no place to even rest, the birth and first cry of the Messiah held in their arms in a stable. And then later on the joy of the others: the shepherds; the exotic wise men; Simeon and Anna, the prophets in the temple who recognized their Savior in this tiny baby; the angelic visits and warnings to flee to another country to protect their child and then to return.

Oh, the inside knowledge Mary and Joseph shared. The conversations they must have had and the questions they must have discussed. "Why us?" must have always been at the top of their list. But from the beginning, they recognized that Jesus, their son, was so much more. His life existed for us all. He was God with Us. His love was offered to the world. And with this knowledge, they chose to live with open hands, trusting in and living out the miraculous love that had been given to them.

In this Advent season, we have the opportunity to reflect on how we can do the same.

Jesus taught,

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34–35).

The ability to do so begins as we open ourselves to God's love. It then grows and overflows as we extend kindness and care and support to others around us.

Sometimes it takes a small step. Sometimes it requires a bigger leap. But through it all, we can trust and know that it is love that holds us.

Because God is with us, love is with us. It is an eternal, vast, and powerful love, yet at the same time a gentle, tender, and personal love.

And it is love that will make a way, no matter what we are facing in this season or in the days ahead.

Benediction

"And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."—Ephesians 3:17–19