

Who Really Loves You?
Genesis 22:1-18 / Luke 2:1-20 / Matthew 19:16-22
2025-12-21

The verse which frames all of Advent comes from *Romans 15:13*: ***“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”*** The four themes are all right here. The God of hope (theme of week one) will fill you with joy (theme of week three) and peace (theme of week two) because you trust Christ.

When you trust Christ, you will overflow with hope. This hope isn’t just for a better day or an end to suffering, but also hope that our lives have meaning and possibility beyond our present situation. This is hope in God who makes all things new. Our hope isn’t in our circumstances. If our hope is only for a change of circumstances, we’ll always be disappointed. That’s why we hope in God **who’s always revealed Himself as** a God of newness, redemption and transformation. Our amazing God sent a Saviour—His Son—to save the world and that includes you and me.

On the second Sunday of Advent, our theme was peace. Isaiah said: “For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given; the government will be on His shoulders. He will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to His authority and peace. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom... forever (Isaiah 9:6, 7).

We can’t achieve peace by trying to bring it about, because it’s not from us, it’s a gift from God—one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit listed in Gal. Peace isn’t **simply an absence of war or conflict; it has a whole inner dimension as well.** It’s a life lived without anxiety or inner turmoil. **A life that’s truly peaceful is** a life resting in the full assurance God’s in charge and will meet all your needs. **The result is** a peace that passes all understanding. That makes sense because **Jesus, the Prince of Peace, came into the world to give us His peace. He’s come into the world to establish peace between God the Father and us—something that’s impossible without Jesus.** In *Romans 5:1* Paul says ***we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ because we’ve been justified through faith in Him.*** In *Colossians 1:20* Paul says ***God made peace with us through Jesus’ blood shed on the cross and urged us to let the peace of Christ rule our hearts.***

This third Sunday of Advent focuses on the theme of joy. Do you have joy in your life—real joy? Like hope and peace, joy is God’s doing, not ours. When circumstances change, “joy” can disappear in a hurry. That’s not joy as God wants us to know it. **If God’s the giver of joy, and God never changes, then real joy, which is centred in God, should never diminish.** *Nehemiah 8:10* says, ***“The joy of the Lord is [our] strength.”*** Joy can and should be constant in your life.

“Why should we be joyful?” By sending Jesus, God’s given us a way to Him, He’s reconciled us to Himself through Jesus when we could never accomplish that on our own. That reconciliation is eternal. God’s demonstrated a love for us that’s beyond belief or comparison: He sent Jesus, Emmanuel—God with us—to die in our place. *Hebrews 12:2* is a most remarkable verse:

“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of God.”

What more could He do? **If Jesus found joy in going to the cross for our benefit, surely we should have joy all the more for what He has done for us!** “Jesus calls you; He calls us all—every one of us. That’s reason to rejoice!

Today, the fourth Sunday of Advent focuses on love. Our language is inadequate when it comes to talking about love. It’s always been so, but particularly in this climate, a man can get into a lot of trouble by telling a woman he loves her if they don’t have a romantic relationship. When we speak of love in English, it’s not very clear exactly what is meant. We talked about the Beatles a few weeks ago and how they had musically introduced a world without God. We mentioned the three songs: “Imagine”, “All We are Saying, is Give Peace a Chance”, and the one worth mentioning today, “All You Need is Love”. What exactly did they mean by “love” in that song?

The emotional part of love is enormous. When you say, “I love your hair” or “I love that car or song or house or recipe or, or, or”...it doesn’t mean you have a romantic relationship with those things. For want of a better expression, it seems to mean you deeply enjoy those things.

The pop song, “As the Years Go By”, by Mashmakhan highlights this confusion: A child asks his mother, “Do you love me?” And it really means “Will you protect me?” His mother answers him, “I love you”. And it really means “You’ve been a good boy.” And as the years go by true love will never die. At 17 a girl says, “Do you love me?” And it really means “Will you respect me?” The teenage boy answers “I love you”. And it really means, “Can I make love to you.” And as the years go by true love will never die. I will love you forever. I will love you forever. At 65 his wife says, “Do you love me?” And it really means, “I’d like to hear it again.” Her husband says to her, “I love you.” But it really means, “I love you to the end.” And as the years go by true love will never die.

So which “version” of love is the right one? With all due respect to Mashmakhan, they missed it. But so does every song that narrows love down to the romantic, or just the sexual.

The Greeks did better at this. They have four (even six) different words for love: **phileia**, (brotherly love) **eros**, (romantic/sexual love) **agape**, (unconditional) and **storge**, (natural affection), **ludus**, (playing or uncommitted love) and **pragma** (practical, mutually beneficial).

I had a dream. Most nights, I dream and five minutes later I can't remember it. But I was preparing a message about love and it had all the examples above. I was among a pretty well-heeled, well-educated group—kind of like a cocktail party on the afternoon of the evening I was to preach. The message was only written this far and I didn't know what else to add and only had a couple of hours to finish. Someone found what I'd written and not unkindly said he hadn't found anything gripping him in those examples. Anxiously I left for the quiet time I needed to finish. **What would convey this message about God's love?** Aren't dreams so weird sometimes?

And this is what came to me. First, God gave us the example of God sending Abraham to sacrifice His son, "his only son who he loved". I've wrestled with that passage for a long time. If I were Abraham, I'm sure I couldn't have done what he was willing to do. I never understood how God could ask Abraham to do such a thing. **As it turned out, God never intended** for Abraham to follow through and kill his only son. **God provided the lamb to be sacrificed. But God did way more than that. He so loved the world** He did send His only Son, whom He loved, to be sacrificed so we could live; so we could live in peace with God and have eternal life with Him.

Second, **how God sent His Son into the world**—literally like a lamb among wolves, **from the safety, the security, the perfection of heaven, to a world that was flat out evil;** wicked in every way—both in thought and action. A mean and cruel place. **And He didn't send Him as an adult,** fully experienced to handle the world. He sent Him as a baby, a helpless baby that needed all the attention and care every baby needs. **And, He put Him into the care of earthly parents who were bound to make wrong decisions and mistakes. He trusted them that much. In much the same way He trusts you and I that much**—even though He knows we will make mistakes—often some very bad ones. Yet He trusts you and I to be His hands and feet and mouth in a world that needs to know Him. Yes, my dream was weird; but God's trust of us is even weirder!

Third, back to my dream, when I awoke, I was immediately drawn to the rich young man who came to Jesus asking what good things he must do to get eternal life. Jesus asks why he's asking Him about what's good since there is only "One" who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments. Pause there. Jesus was helping the man, affirming he'd indeed come to the right source for the right answer. If you want the right answer, you'd better come to the right source. It's like the man who offers to answer your questions for \$5; right answers, on the other hand, cost \$25. Lots of people can answer your questions. But too often, they're not the right answers. The man had come to Jesus, He'd come to the "One", perhaps unknowingly, to get answers. But he'd come to the right person. Jesus is the good "One" —God with us, Emmanuel.

Did you notice Jesus says, "If you want to enter life". Do you want to enter life? Strange question, isn't it? Well, Jesus, I thought I had already entered it. But **Jesus means real life.** And real life is life with Him, life like He lives it and eternal life. That's the life He wants

for you and me. The man affirms that he's led a good moral life. But he still pauses to ask what, if anything he might still lack, probably expecting a pat on the back that says, "you're good, you're in." But Jesus doesn't do that. He says, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor and you'll have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." **This guy is us.** We're affluent compared to the rest of the world and often try to justify we're "good enough" for heaven.

When the young man heard this he went away sad because he had great wealth. Here's the point. Jesus loved this man. He didn't say this to disillusion him. He told him what kind of love is kingdom love. This man happened to be rich. What he needed to know was that riches couldn't save him no matter how comfortable they made his life. We don't know what happened to that man, whether he ever turned and put Jesus 1st or continued to worship his wealth. But, the man knew what he had to do, the choice he needed to make. Jesus does the same thing for you and me. Whatever it is that we're relying on, if it's not Jesus, it's not enough. He's the only thing, the only person we need to focus on. He's the "good One" who we need to listen to and follow. Nothing more and nothing less. He loves us enough to take us exactly as we are but not to leave us the way we are. He will transform you to be like Him, to love like Him.

I want to close with something that happened to me at the pool where I met Bobby. He's a delightful guy. Strikes up good, friendly conversations with anyone. Funny how you can have deep conversations with people you meet casually—at the gym or at the grocery store. Don't ignore them—they are or can be divine appointments. One morning he was quiet and I mentioned it to him. He said, "You know, I just get thinking. I get wondering. I wonder why we're on this planet—what it's all about. If you could put it in one sentence, one thing, just one, what would you say?" In all my life, I've never been asked that question so directly. Like when Phillip ran up to the Ethiopian official in the chariot and he was already reading Isaiah 53—primed to hear the Gospel. The Holy Spirit prompted my answer. **I said it straight in just one sentence: "Jesus loves you. That's what it's all about; it's why we're here. Jesus wants a relationship with you." That's it.**

What's love? Who really loves you? It looks like Jesus. It sounds like Jesus. It is Jesus. Jesus has been on a mission—a search and rescue mission right from the manger. Just as He sought Zacchaeus while he was up in the sycamore tree, so He is seeking you and me. We don't know about the rich young man, but we do know that Zacchaeus' heart was changed and that salvation came to his house. Jesus has come to seek and save what was lost. We need look no further than the manger in Bethlehem for life's answers, for love's answer. Live it. Tell it like it is—today, tomorrow, this week, every week! That will make for a fulfilled. Christmas!