

Love Descended
2nd Cong. Church—Winsted

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12/22/24

Scripture Reading: Daniel 7:13–14

Sermon Text: Luke 2:1–7

A young couple was engaged, and unexpectedly, the young woman broke off the relationship. Later, she regretted what she had done and wrote this letter to her former fiancée: “Dearest Tommy, No words could ever express the great unhappiness I’ve felt since breaking our engagement. Please say you’ll take me back. No one could ever take your place in my heart, so please forgive me. I love you, I love you, I love you!”

Yours forever,
Marie

PS: Congratulations on winning the state lottery!

What motivates our love? Does our love flow from self-interest, or is our love self-sacrificial, as Jesus exemplified? The fourth Advent candle we lit this morning signifies love and reminds us of the selfless, sacrificial love of Jesus, who entered this world in frail human flesh on a rescue mission to save you and me. At this time of Christmas, the sacrificial love of Jesus motivates us to consider how we have loved in the past year and, more importantly, how we will love in the coming new year.

The Gospel writer Luke was the only non-Jewish author of a New Testament book. Paul refers to him as “the beloved physician” in Colossians 4:14. Luke was educated and possessed a great command of the Greek language, but He was also a highly regarded historian and the writer of His gospel and the Book of Acts, which makes up more than a quarter of the New Testament. Luke tells us in the introduction to his gospel that he carefully investigated everything concerning the life of Jesus and wrote it out in consecutive order so that the truth would be known. Luke was not only a careful historian who sought out and interviewed eyewitnesses but also an early missionary, traveling with Paul on His second, third, and final missionary journeys. Luke is held in high regard by modern historians. British author, archaeologist, and New Testament scholar Sir William Ramsay began his investigation of the Book of Acts with an unfavorable attitude toward it but concluded in the end that it showed “marvelous truth.”¹ In a later book, Ramsay said this about Luke’s stature as a historian:

Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact; he is possessed of the true historic sense...this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians.²

We see further evidence in the Book of Acts, of his careful research. Acts contains hundreds of specific details, as would be expected in a factual eyewitness account. These include prevailing shipping winds, ports, titles of government officials, the structure of the coastline, islands, cities, countries, landmarks, local industry, land routes, languages spoken in various places, political customs, and the rights of Roman citizens, to name but a few. These have been cross-checked with other ancient sources, archaeological investigations, and local research. Dr. Norman Geisler states, “Luke names thirty-two countries, fifty-four cities, and nine islands without error.”³ Luke has repeatedly been vindicated when questioned or challenged. So, as with the entire Bible, we have great confidence that Luke’s birth narrative is factual and trustworthy.

Jesus was born during the reign of Ceasar Augustus, who reigned from 27 BC to AD 14. Ceasar issued a decree that a census be taken of all the inhabited Earth, which, from the Roman perspective, meant the entire Roman Empire, including Israel. The census was for the purpose of taxation, and there were no medical exemptions or exceptions. So, Joseph was compelled to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, Joseph’s ancestral home, because, like Mary, Joseph was also a descendant of David, who had been born in Bethlehem. We don’t know for sure why

Mary traveled with Joseph because, usually, women were not required to register. Did Mary choose to go with Joseph, or did the Holy Spirit instruct her to go with Joseph? We don't know for sure, but either way, God was at work in their decision to travel together to Bethlehem because the Messiah needed to be born in Bethlehem to fulfill the prophecy of Micah 5:2.

Their journey to Bethlehem was about 85 to 90 miles. Mary was probably 15 or 16 at the time, and, in keeping with the customs of the time, we can speculate that Joseph was probably in his late teens or early 20s. Notice that Luke makes the point in verse 5 that Joseph and Mary were engaged and that she was with child. The Savior of the world was to be born in scandal to most outside observers. Mary knew that she was a virgin when Jesus was conceived. Joseph knew that the Holy Spirit conceived the child in Mary, as the children taught us in the pageant this morning. Joseph was going to send Mary away secretly, but as we learn in Matthew 1:20–21:

20 ...an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

21 "She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

But to the outside world, and even amongst their extended family, who might not have believed them, Jesus would have been considered to have been conceived out of wedlock, which would have been a great scandal at the time. While Mary was with Joseph in Bethlehem, the time came for the baby to be born. She gave birth to her firstborn son and swaddled him in cloths, which were probably strips of cloth that they might have brought along in anticipation of the birth of the Christ child. They laid the baby Jesus in a manger, the feeding trough of animals because they had no proper crib or even a room to stay in because there was no room in the inn.

Our text describes the most important event in human history, and it takes place in what appears to be a stable, with the Christ child laid in an animal feeding trough. While the community around Mary and Joseph would have questioned their morality and marital fidelity, imagine for a moment the taunts and ridicule that Jesus might have received from His peers growing up. Have you ever observed adolescents being unkind and even mean to each other? Many teens lack a filter, and talk can quickly turn dark and hurtful. In Jesus' time, the questions surrounding Jesus' birth would have made Him a target of immature banter and coarse, hurtful talk. It can only be out of love that Jesus came to our rescue, and love prevails.

You see, love descended on that first Christmas. Love descended in the person of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, long promised to Israel, who, as we read in Isaiah 49, would extend salvation to the ends of the Earth. If we have any doubts, God's purposes are made clear in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

In September 2018, an article appeared about a private letter that Ronald Reagan wrote to his father-in-law, Loyal Davis, a neurosurgeon who was just days from death.

Reagan was worried about the man's physical health. But, the author writes:

Something else worried Reagan: The dying man was an atheist. Davis once wrote, "I have never been able to subscribe to the divinity of Jesus Christ nor his virgin birth. I don't believe in his resurrection, or a heaven or hell...."

Reagan, on the other hand, believed everyone would face a day of judgment and that Davis' was near. So the most powerful man in the world put everything else aside, took pen in hand, and set out on an urgent mission—to rescue one soul.

This letter was found in the Reagan Library as part of Nancy Reagan's personal effects [and reads as follows]:

Dear Loyal, I hope you'll forgive me for this, but I've been wanting to write you ever since we talked on the phone. I'm aware of the strain you are under and believe with all my heart there is help for that. . . .

It was a miracle that a young man of 30 yrs. without credentials as a scholar or priest had more impact on the world than all the teachers, scientists, emperors, generals, and admirals who ever lived, all put together. Either he was who he said he was or he was the greatest faker & charlatan who ever lived. But would a liar & faker suffer the death he did?

Reagan wrote out John 3:16 for his father-in-law and then added:

We have been promised that all we have to do is ask God in Jesus' name to help when we have done all we can—when we've come to the end of our strength and abilities, and we'll have that help. We only have to trust and have faith in his infinite goodness and mercy.

Did the letter have any impact? Nancy Reagan, who was with [her father Loyal Davis]...would later claim that her father did turn to God at the end of his life.⁴

The Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 2:3–4 that God desires all men to be saved, and Jesus says in John 14:6 that no one will enter heaven unless they believe in Him and place their faith in Him. There is no one that is beyond the saving hand of Jesus; there is no sin that is not covered by the blood of Jesus, and there is no one that is too far gone. If you have not placed your faith in Christ, repent and believe in Jesus that this Christmas, you will be reconciled to God and be at peace with Him, now and for all eternity in heaven. It is the greatest gift you will ever receive.

To grasp the magnitude of what the Father and Son have done for us, we need to consider our Call to Worship from Isaiah 9. The child born to us on that first Christmas morning is the incarnate eternal God. The government rests upon His shoulders, meaning that He will be the King of kings, governing all eternity in righteousness. The child will be a Wonderful Counselor, expressing the truth that the way to live is in accordance with how Jesus lived. Jesus has shown us the right way to live, for it is the way of reconciliation with God, peace in this life, hope that does not disappoint us, and joy that will last for eternity! Furthermore, Isaiah refers to the Messiah, Jesus, as Mighty God, making the divinity of Jesus abundantly clear.

When we consider the attributes of God, we see that Jesus possesses them. In Scripture, God is eternal, and in Matthew 9:4, we see that Jesus is eternal. God is our Savior, and in Matthew 1:21, we see that Jesus is our Savior. God is holy, and in Acts 3:14, we see that Jesus is holy and righteous. God is the forgiver of sin, and in Matthew 9:2, we see that Jesus is the forgiver of sin. God is King over all, and in Revelation 17:14, we see that Jesus is King over all. God is the Creator, and in John 1:2, we see that Jesus is the Creator. Furthermore, we see that Jesus is omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent in Matthew 18:20, Matthew 9:4, and Matthew 28:18, respectively. Finally, as God is due worship, we see that Jesus is due worship in Matthew 14:33. Jesus possesses the attributes of God because He is God.

But we are not done when it comes to the greatness and glory of the Messiah, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who was born to Mary. In our Scripture reading, Daniel has a vision of the Son of Man, a title with which Jesus refers to himself over 80 times in the New Testament. Daniel has a vision of Jesus and His exalted position at the right hand of the Father. In the clouds of heaven, Daniel sees one like a Son of Man approaching the Ancient of Days. This one, who is like a Son of Man, is presented to the Ancient of Days. Notice that Daniel says that this individual is like a Son of Man. You and I are sons and daughters of men. The individual in

Daniel's vision is "like" a Son of Man in that He has the appearance of a man to Daniel, but He is so much more than a mere human. In the vision, the Son of Man, who is Jesus, has the appearance of a human, but He possesses divine attributes. The Ancient of days is God the Father, and in the vision, He confers to the Son an everlasting kingdom that cannot be destroyed. That would mean that the Son is an eternal being with an eternal kingdom, and the extent of His dominion is all nations, peoples, and tongues. In other words, the Son of man in Daniel 7 is one and the same as the King of kings and Lord of lords describing Jesus in Revelation 19:6.

You see, that baby born in Bethlehem was rich in ways we can never imagine. The whole universe was His and had been created through Him and for Him. Yet, for your sake, He became poor. He abandoned His throne at the right hand of the Father and entered the creation He had made because of His love for you. He emptied himself of His divine prerogatives, becoming poor so that you could be rich beyond your wildest imagination as an heir of the kingdom of God. This Christmas, let joy rise in you as you meditate on all that Jesus has done for you. The incomparable Christ was present in eternity. He is a member of the Trinity. The universe was created through Him, and the world will be saved by Him. He took on human form as an infant child and taught us how to love and live. He is the King of kings, the Lord of lords, and the Prince of peace. He is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. He is our source of hope and the reason for our joy. He paid a debt we could never pay. He is worthy of our love, complete allegiance, and devotion.

One of the questions that we should ponder this Sunday before Christmas is how we must respond to the love that Jesus has shown for us. We certainly must not hoard the love Jesus lavished on us by keeping it for ourselves. The love of God was meant to be shared with others and broadcast far and wide to the ends of the Earth. The Apostle John writes in Chapter 1, verses 7 to 9 of his first letter:

1 John 4:7–9

7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

8 The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

9 By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him.

John put a finer point on the matter in verse 19 of the same chapter, saying, "We love because He first loved us." This Christmas Sunday, the question for each of us is how we have loved in the year gone by, but more importantly, how we will love in the year ahead. Will we love others as Jesus has loved us, or will we ignore the example of the sacrificial love that Jesus has shown for us? If we are the redeemed people of God, we will seek to love our families, friends, strangers, and the destitute who have no hope with the type of love that Jesus has lavished on us.

Does love really make a difference in this war-torn, broken world filled with hate, abuse, and violence? How, you might say, is a simple act of love going to make a difference? As you all know, our church packed 66 boxes for Operation Christmas Child this year, which were filled with toys and things that children love. The boxes are delivered to impoverished children worldwide, along with the gospel message of hope and salvation, which is available to us through faith in Jesus. Putting a shoebox together is not a major sacrifice in our wealthy nation, but here is a true story that appeared in the news in October 2019, showing the impact that a simple act of love can have on a child.

Livia Satterfield Young was a 12-year-old girl in a Romanian orphanage when her life was changed—forever—by an Operation Christmas Child shoebox. Livia was an orphan for 10 years. She described a lack of food, hygiene supplies,

and no feeling of love and happiness. She said, “Some days our food supply was so low that all we had was a piece of bread that was hard as a rock and moldy. We also wore the same clothes for a week. We had only one toothbrush which we shared with hundreds of other children.”

Livia longed to feel someone’s love and warm embrace. She said, “I wanted to feel like I existed in this world.” That all changed when [Operation Christmas Child] delivered shoeboxes full of personal hygiene items, school supplies, and toys to her orphanage. The same day, an American missionary group came, and Livia met a woman named Connie. Livia said:

Before we opened our boxes, they shared with us about people who packed them because they loved us. I was so mesmerized by the word “love.” And then, they shared “the greatest news of all.” That there’s a God, and He gave His one and only son who died on the cross for me because He loves me. God made this possible through a simple gift. It sparked so much love, joy and hope in my life.

The same year Connie arranged for Livia to stay with a Christian family, and she accepted Christ as her personal Lord and Savior. She said, “I wish I [would’ve] had a mega-sized microphone to tell the whole world I had Jesus in my heart. Two years later, when I was 14, Connie came back to Romania, adopted me, and took me home to my brand-new family.”⁵

Today, Livia lives in Georgia and attended college there. She speaks on behalf of Operation Christmas Child for Samaritan’s Purse whenever she can.⁶ She is a testament to the fact that our God can take a simple act of love and use it to transform lives. When the news of violence and hatred gets you down, overcome the negativity with simple acts of love that flow from the love that Jesus showed us. Brothers and sisters, this Christmas, rejoice that God so loved the world that he sent His Son to save all who repent of their sins and believe in Him. Go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born, and most importantly, love others as Jesus loved you. Amen.

¹. William Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveler and Roman Citizen*, Chapter 1, Available online at www.ccel.org/ccel/ramsay/paul_roman.iv.html (Accessed 11/15/2010).

². William Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*, 222, Available online at www.archive.org/stream/bearingofrecentd00ramsuoft#page/n7/mode/2up (Accessed 11/15/2010).

³. Geisler, “Archaeology, New Testament,” *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*.

⁴ Karen Tumulty, “A private letter from Ronald Reagan to his dying father-in-law shows the president’s faith,” *The Washington Post* (9-14-18).

⁵ Gant News <https://gantnews.com/2019/10/14/former-romanian-orphan-shares-operation-christmas-child-shoebox-story/#:~:text=CURWENSVILLE%20%E2%80%93%20Twenty%20years%20ago%2C%20Livia,an%20Operation%20Christmas%20Child%20shoebox.>

⁶ <https://www.fosters.com/story/lifestyle/2010/10/04/the-story-romanian-girl-shoebox/51450503007/>