

## **AN ADVENT MESSAGE OF LOVE**

Isaiah 7:10-16  
Matthew 1:18-25

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If it was easy for us to love each other, we wouldn't have to be reminded to do it...if it came naturally, Jesus probably wouldn't have chosen love as the number one commandment. If we knew how to love ourselves, and our enemies, then words about love might not take up so much real estate in the Bible.

Today's New Testament reading is a story about the hard kind of love. In the passage Lincoln/Gus read us from Matthew, Joseph exemplifies for us love that confronts fear and chooses to overcome it with courage.

Matthew tells us that Mary and Joseph are engaged to be married. In the first century world, this is not a romantic declaration of intent. Rather, it is a legal contract, binding in every respect. To be engaged - or espoused, betrothed, or pledged (some of the other words used in various translations of the Bible) - was essentially to be married yet without having consummated that marriage or as yet living together. Which means that when Joseph learns Mary is pregnant, he concludes that she has been unfaithful to him and so he likely experiences the pain and sense of betrayal that anyone of us would have felt at such a devastating revelation. Or, some scholars now posit that she might have been the victim of a sexual assault. It's not something we like to think about as we look at the holy family and sing Christmas carols, but it was a common occurrence in that day. The Roman occupying army had little regard for the agency or dignity of anyone under their jurisdiction.

In Joseph's day, there were only two realistic actions when faced with the fact of Mary's pregnancy. He could either publicly declare the news, in which case Mary could have been punished by stoning, or he could divorce her quietly, and he chooses the latter course.

It takes a visit from an angel to cause Joseph to orient himself in a different way. The angel says, "Don't be afraid to get married to Mary" which tells us that Joseph indeed was afraid. Afraid of what people would think, perhaps. Afraid of his own emotions? Afraid he wouldn't be able to learn to love this baby?

Joseph courageously chooses the path of love. Still, the months leading up to the birth of Jesus must have been anguishing for both Mary and Joseph. Can you imagine the gossip in the village? Surely there was shame involved, and name-calling, if not to Mary's face then certainly behind her back. As one writer has said, "It was not one blissful baby shower after another..."

This is a story of love. Not romantic love, for we have no evidence that Mary and Joseph's relationship was based on the kinds of feelings we in our culture associate with marriage proposals.

Joseph's love for Mary is most likely not based on feeling, but on **faith** and **promise**, and a belief that God is at work in their lives together. It is a risk-taking love, a love that does not care about popular public opinion, a love that does what is right.

A parent comes into my office and tells me about how poorly she's being treated by her adolescent daughter. "She doesn't like me right now. She's told me that to my face," this woman says, through tears. "Some of my friends say I should give her a

taste of her own medicine, treat her as badly as she's treating me. But I just can't do that. Am I wrong?"

I notice someone who looks upset in church. I find a minute afterwards to ask him how he is. "Oh, I'm ok, but thanks. I'm just really tired. I've been bringing dinner to my parents three nights a week. They live in Akron, so it's a long drive. My coworkers say I shouldn't do it. That I should tell my parents they have to move closer, or into a facility. But I just can't do that to them. They did so much for me all those years."

There is love that pays college tuition even when the grandchild doesn't show much appreciation. There is love that visits a friend in the nursing home, even though most of the time the friend does nothing but complain.

Let me be clear. I'm not advocating for people to become doormats. I'm not saying we should always just give and give without limits. There is a time to say "no." Boundaries are healthy for all parties.

What our gospel story calls our attention to today is courageous love.

I have talked before about Bryan Stevenson, one of my heroes. He is the founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, a human rights organization committed to ending mass incarceration and excessive punishment. He and his staff have won reversals, relief or release for over 135 wrongly condemned prisoners on death row. I highly recommend his book *Just Mercy*, or the movie of the same name.

In a recent interview, he talked about his work towards justice, and his belief that justice must be rooted in love. He has learned to see the humanity of his clients, some of them innocent people who have been treated worse than animals while in prison.

AND he has learned that he has to also see that the prison guards are human too, and the attorneys who slept through the trials - they're human too - and so are the judges who allowed their courtrooms to be places where justice was a cruel joke. What does it mean to try to love these enemies? How hard is love? But if we're not working towards a world where we see every single human being as worthy of love and respect and forgiveness, nothing is going to change for the better.

Anthony Ray Hinton spent 30 years on death row for a crime he did not commit. In 1985, in Birmingham, Alabama, two fast food restaurants were robbed and two managers were killed. There were no witnesses and no fingerprints. Hinton had no criminal background and he passed a lie detector test. Yet he was convicted. Stevenson and his team worked tirelessly on Hinton's behalf and finally the Supreme Court overturned his conviction and he was eventually freed.

Early in the morning on the day he was to be released, Anthony Hinton said to Bryan Stevenson, "I've been up all night and I've made an important decision. I've decided I have to forgive them for what they've done to me. I can't hate them. If I walk out of here hating them, they'll still have me in prison, because hatred is a kind of prison."

If Anthony Hinton can let go of hatred after losing thirty years of his life, what kind of resentment might we want to loosen? What old hurts are we gripping to tightly? Who are we refusing to love? Are we so caught up in the narrative of our culture that we believe we must focus only on the ways in which we disagree with people, instead of looking for the things we have in common? Who are we refusing to love? Sometimes it's an enemy. Sometimes it's ourselves.

In the Christmas story, Joseph shows us love that is a choice, sometimes a hard and difficult choice, but one that makes God's love manifest in the world.

Each week during Advent, we have read a passage from the prophet Isaiah. We read Isaiah during Advent because he is a prophet, a poet, who writes of the longing of his people for a better day, a longing for freedom for people who are in captivity, a longing for home for people who are in exile. Isaiah describes God's intention for the world to be a place of shalom - peace and justice and wholeness - because he knows that people need to keep hope alive. We read Isaiah today because we too can feel like strangers in a strange land. We look around us and see a world divided and polarized, a world where words of hatred are flung around with abandon. We see so much hurt and need and we feel so anxious about it all. We wonder if God's intentions are still real for us. Isaiah says, "God will send you a sign to remind you that God wants nothing but good things for everything and everyone God has created." This will be the sign: "A young woman will become pregnant and will give birth. You will name the child Emmanuel which means God is with us."

We are weary people. That word "weary" leapt out at me in the Isaiah passage for today. We're weary of pandemics, weary of taking sides, weary of name-calling. Weary of violence and weary of worry itself.

We don't have to solve every problem today. We don't have to solve anything by ourselves. All that we are asked to do is live with hearts open to love. Do the next right thing. As we move into this Christmas week, look for the sign, notice it, celebrate it, share it. The child's name is Emmanuel. The God who is with us loves us. For this day, that is enough.