

This is Love – 1 John 4:7-11

Each year we tell the story of Christmas, an ageless story that captures the imaginations of the young and old alike. This week I was visiting at a house and I met a delightful new friend. She was all of four years old and full of energy. As soon as I entered the house, she wanted to play hide and seek. She took me by the hand and said, "Hide!"

During the visit with her grandparents, she constantly came to where we were to ask questions, to show me her toys and to tell stories. She never sat still for one second the whole time we visited. However, when I was ready to leave I suggested we read the Christmas story from Luke 2. As I read, she quieted down and stood by my side. When I finished reading through the story of Mary and Joseph, and baby Jesus, the angels and the shepherds she simply said, "Read it again!"

Many people feel that way. We read the same story year after year yet somehow it never gets old. We are attracted to Mary and Joseph, the God chosen parents of Jesus. We marvel at their submissiveness to God, and the price they are willing to pay to do His will. We thrill at the story of the angel visit to shepherds. We wish we could have heard that angelic choir, and the message from heaven spoken by the angel, "Good tidings of great joy that was for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David is Christ the Lord. And this shall be the sign to you: you shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

And then there is the key to the whole story, baby Jesus. The story of the shepherds and angels is wonderful, but if you do not go to the manger and find the baby lying there, you miss the whole point. Without that baby, there could be no Christmas, no story of redemption, no hope for mankind. That baby, baby Jesus, came to be our Saviour. As many preachers have proclaimed through the ages, "There was always the shadow of a cross over the manger where the innocent baby lay."

This morning I will not retell the Christmas story, but want to look at the story behind the story. We all know of stories where we heard the surface story, but there was something more going on. For instance, in the story, *Les Miserables*, we are first introduced to Jean Valjean as he comes out of prison. We are left with the impression he is a terrible man, one who has no morals or scruples, and that is why he spent 19 years in prison. But as the story unfolds we discover his crime that sent him to prison was stealing bread to feed his sister and her children who were desperate. We suddenly realize there is more to his story than what we were first told. There is a story behind the story.

This is true of the Christmas story. There is more to the story than a simple tale of a poor family giving birth to a baby in a stable. The Gospel of Luke tells us about the angels who tell the shepherds the identity of the baby. The Gospel of Matthew shows us that the baby is a king through the visit of the Magi. Mark is strangely silent on the whole birth story, but the Gospel

of John tends to get to the story behind the story. John's Gospel starts with this wonderful introduction to who Jesus is, "the Word" who was God, and who became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1: 14). In just a few brief verses John tells the story behind the Christmas story: God became a man and lived among us.

In John's letters to the churches he picks up on this theme, the story behind the story of Christmas. Our text for today takes us behind the scenes to reveal the "why" of the Christmas story.

Hear again the Word of the Lord: - **read 1 John 4:7-11** -

It is clear that the Holy Spirit inspired John to challenge the church to live a life of love. They can claim to be Christians, but if they do not show love in how they interact with each other and the people in their lives, then they are only fooling themselves. God lives within all believers, and since God is love, it stands to reason that those indwelt by God will learn to show love to others. That is the heart of his message.

So what does this have to do with Christmas?

Take a look again at verse 9. This, in a nutshell, is John's Christmas story.

"This is how God showed his love among us. He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him."

The coming of God's one and only Son into the world is the Christmas story. As the contemporary Christmas song "Mary Did You Know?" points out,

"When you kiss your little baby you kissed the face of God."

That is quite the thought. If we do not see Jesus as God come to us we have missed the mystery and awe of Christmas. We also will not be able to make sense of Jesus' mission, a mission that would take him through the countryside of Galilee healing and delivering people, "doing good" yet winding up crucified as a criminal on a Roman cross. This is a senseless death, at best a martyrdom, **if** we do not understand who Jesus is or why he came. His death was no accident, no failed rescue attempt: **it was the rescue**. Jesus, as God, was paying the price through his death to provide salvation for every man, woman and child that ever lived on the earth, or ever will. The infinite value of the life of incarnate God was the price necessary to pay the debt we owed.

If Jesus is anyone less than God himself the mission was a failure. As Psalm 49:7-8 says:

No man can redeem the life of another
or give to God a ransom for them—

⁸the ransom for a life is costly,
no payment is ever enough—

Jesus was not just a man. He was also fully God. He could and did pay the price to ransom us from death.

That is the story, the greatest story ever told, what we call the Gospel story. "Jesus came to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10).

Yet we set out to look for the story behind the story this morning. So we ask ourselves the question, "Why would God do this? Why would He go to such lengths to save us from our sin?" Jesus would suffer a terrible death, heightened by the fact that he knew it was coming and he could have avoided it. But he did not. He set himself to go to Jerusalem where he knew he would be betrayed, arrested, tried, beaten and crucified.

Have no doubt about it – Jesus knew what crucifixion meant. He had seen many dying men nailed to Roman crosses as he journeyed through Galilee. The Romans gladly displayed those they deemed deserving of death so all would see and know who was in charge around there. It is reported that at the siege of Jerusalem in AD 70 there were 500 crucifixions per day for some time. Jesus saw the horrors of crucifixion and knew what was involved, but still he went to the cross willingly, so he could rescue us.

Why? Look again at our verse. The story behind the story is God's love.

We read in verse 8 that God is love. It does not say that God chooses to love – it says he is love. It is God's essential character to love. If you describe a god that does not demonstrate love in any way, then it is not the God of the Bible.

Neither does it say, "love is God." That would mean that God is not personal, knowable or real. This god is just a feeling. That is not the God of the Bible either.

God is love. And verse 9 says that God demonstrates his love by sending his one and only Son. This is the Christmas story. The story behind the Christmas story is the love of God.

Hymn writer John F. Driver penned these words:

Wonderful story of love;
Tell it to me again;
Wonderful story of love;
Wake the immortal strain!
Angels with rapture announce it,
Shepherds with wonder receive it;
Sinner, oh, won't you believe it?
Wonderful story of love.

When I think of Jesus coming from heaven to be born as a baby, giving up all the power and glory and majesty of his Divine nature to become wholly human, yet also fully God. Philippians 2 says,

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶ Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

⁷ rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

You can almost feel the awe and wonder in Paul as he pens these words.

Verse 10 tells us why Jesus was sent as God's gift of love to mankind: so he might be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. John is using sacrificial language here, describing Jesus' mission in terms of the sacrifices at the temple.

When John the Baptist saw Jesus he said, "Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). It had been revealed to John the Baptist that Jesus would die for the sins of the people.

Every day in the temple lambs were killed, their blood sprinkled on the altar as a sign of man's sinfulness and God's provision for forgiveness. Sadly, these sacrifices only pointed to man's need and could "never purify the conscience of the worshipper" (Hebrews 9:9).

Jesus came to be the perfect sacrifice that did away with the need for any further sacrifices. As we noted last week, the shepherds who raised the sheep for the temple sacrifices would soon be out of a job (if everyone trusted in Jesus alone for salvation).

Note what John says here: what does love look like? It is God taking the initiative to rescue us. He sent his Son to be the sacrifice for our sins. We think we know how to love but we really have no clue compared to God's love. The good news is that God dwells in the life of the believer and God's love starts to flow out of the life of a Christian as the Holy Spirit leads them.

So the story behind the story of Christmas is the love of God.

The story of Christmas is that you are loved by God. Jesus came on that rescue mission for you, and for me. We needed to be rescued from sin and its "wages" or consequences: death. We were destined for hell, but God sent His Son to rescue us.

This is the true meaning of Christmas. God loves you and sent His Son to rescue you, to call you to be his son or daughter. Take away everything else – trees, feasts, songs, presents, family gatherings, holidays and we still have a message of "good tidings of great joy. For unto us is born this day in the city of David, a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord." His birth shouts out to all creation: GOD LOVES YOU! That is the story behind the story of Christmas.