

John 3:16-18 God's Great Love

In the years of observing Advent, I have discovered a variety of traditions and points of emphasis. For instance, some see the following progression from week to week; prophets, angels, shepherds, and magi. In another tradition; patriarchs, Bethlehem, John the Baptist, Annunciation. Still another; second coming, John the Baptist, the coming of the savior, Mary and Joseph. Other traditions are more general seeing some combination of Peace, Hope, Faith, Joy and Love.

In this latter vein the emphasis for this 4th Sunday is Love. Since this is Christmas Eve, I thought there would be no better opportunity to make a day of it, and reflect on the biblical emphasis on love, unconditional, unselfish, sacrificial.

The Johannine Literature, as it is called, is a good place to look. The Gospel of John and the 1st Epistle make a theme of Love. May I suggest that, in this morning's reflection, rather than to think of our love for God, or for each other, we might spend the next few minutes thinking about God's love for us, which is primary, of course, and more than anything else, sums up the message of Christmas.

I am reminded of the hymn, "There Is A Name I Love to Hear," with its refrain, "O, how I love Jesus . . . because he first loved me.

John 3:16

We have heard once again, from one of the most well-known texts in all the Bible, John 3:16,

"For God so love the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him *shall not perish*, but have eternal life."

This is, of course, as simple and straightforward a presentation of the gospel message as there is in the Bible. It speaks of the Incarnation, "Word made flesh," to use the words of the prologue to John's gospel.

The idea of God becoming a human being exercised the minds of early believers, started them thinking in ways never before dared and since has continued to inspire humans beings to wonder and praise and also to increasingly higher expressions of goodwill in their interactions with one another.

I am reminded also of Paul In Philippians 2, where Paul expands upon his exhortation to, among other things, have the same love, by saying;

"Have this attitude among you, which was the attitude of Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And, being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself

and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.” Philippians 2:5-8

God Is Love

But it is in the 1st Letter of John that we find another exhortation, another encouragement, another reflection on God’s sacrifice, that reveals God’s nature and stretches our understanding,

“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God *is* Love. And 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.”

What an Idea this is . . . God is Love? The whole gospel story, including the life and teaching of Jesus, his miraculous interactions with suffering people, his own suffering and death, and the resurrection itself is a grand demonstration of God’s love for us, a demonstration that very nearly unites us even though in other ways our lives are characterized by the things that divide us and by our failures of love.

We are exhorted to love one another, not merely because this is what God has done and wants us to do, but because it is a revelation of the very being of God.

Un-Love

I do not want to say very much about all the ways human beings find *not* to love one another. I may sometimes speak of divisions among us; racial and ethnic, social (economic and educational), religious and ideological, and political just to name a few.

Sometimes we see our devotion to these things as the result of our faith, of seeking out God’s will, as if what God wants from us is primarily to overcome one another with the rightness of our ideas or our causes.

But here we see the futility of that perspective played out right before us because God has demonstrated divine love for us all by sending to us the one and only son, full and grace and truth.

The Demonstration

It is not necessary for us to think too much of the implications for our everyday lives of this love, at least not right at the moment, but just to behold it. Like a great piece of music or work of art, or a mountain vista or a sunrise over the ocean that can take our breath away with its beauty, just behold it in the images of the nativity:

The shepherds and the angels

The magi and the star

The manger with the animals and

Mary and Joseph and the child

This is God's love.

It is altogether against what one ought to expect. Given our sinfulness and God's righteousness, one might expect God to come in a show of power with a reprimand and a punishment in hand.

A reproachful appearance is what we deserve, and no one is able to be excepted from it. But here, in the nativity, it is not what we get. Instead, God is presented in the birth of a child, one of the most joyous of all experiences common among people, with an angelic choir and the gift-bearing magi, images that are anything but domineering and punitive.

The birth of Jesus is not the whole of the gospel message, to be sure, but it takes us by surprise and starts us thinking, until we see in it a revelation of God as loving and kind, an idea captured by John in the 3rd chapter of his gospel as we learn that the motivation for Incarnation is unselfish love and the purpose is our redemption. The Incarnation itself is a sacrifice, as we learn from Paul, but it is a genuine sacrifice, flowing out of God's nature. It is God, being God's self.

Somehow the words are not as grand as the thing itself is. The pictures are better. Dwell in them, savor them - God's Great Love for us.

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