

Love Came Down at Christmas

December 5, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Philippians 1:3-11

Last week we explored what is probably the most popular of all Advent hymns – O Come, O Come, Emmanuel – a hymn that dates back perhaps as much as 1500 years, that was prayed and chanted in monasteries, long before it was ever sung as a hymn in the way we sing it today.

Today we are moving forward in history quite a bit, and landing in the 1800s, with not an Advent hymn but a true Christmas song. But I am guessing that this is probably not the most familiar or the most popular of all Christmas songs that we might choose to sing. It kinda gets the short end of the stick, so-to-speak, when it comes to finding its way onto popular Christmas albums.

I couldn't find any punk rock arrangements of this song, or Kelly Clarkson pop arrangements, or Pentatonix a cappella arrangements. I did find one arrangement, sung by the contemporary Christian band Jars of Clay, and frankly, was not all that inspired by it.

So, this song really comes in as the Christmas carol underdog. Which is, I think, really where some of its beauty and its power lies. It doesn't lend itself well to jingly bells or to full orchestra arrangements, or to loud rock bands. It's not high-energy like Joy to the World – which we will be exploring next week. Its theology isn't really all that deep or complicated, like the song we explored last week. For this song, simplicity is the name of the game.

Simple words, simple stories, simple concepts.

In fact, the poem that this song is based on originally contained one four-syllable word in the last stanza – the word universal – and the writer changed it so that, with only one exception, the whole song is nothing but simple, one-and-two-syllable words.

Easy to read, easy to sing, as basic as it gets.

And that was intentional.

How often do we tend to over-complicate this season of the year?

Whether it's in rushing around like crazy, trying to check everybody off of our gift list this year, trying to find the best Black Friday deals in stores or Cyber Monday deals online; decorating to the hilt with the entire closet that has been devoted to Christmas decorations because – let's face it – some decorations can really take up a lot of

space...and Christmas decorations seem to have babies. I don't know how they do it, but decorations always seem to beget more decorations.

Or lining up our activity calendar with all of those December must-dos...

- When I was growing up, the little New Mexico desert town that I lived in had a river running through town, and all of the high-dollar real estate was along the river. HUGE homes, with huge backyards, all boasting the prettiest river view in town. And at Christmas time, the residents would put up elaborate light displays in their backyards, and the city would run boat tours up and down the river, so that people could see the beautiful Christmas lights from the water. It was pretty spectacular.
- When I was in Albuquerque, the city had a Biopark system that included the Albuquerque Zoo, Aquarium, and Botanical Gardens, and every year the Gardens set up an *insane* Christmas light display with more than 600 animated light sculptures, utilizing more than 200 miles of Christmas lights, if you stretched them all out, end-to-end. It was so big you could literally get lost in them all, if you weren't careful.
- I know some people who go to great lengths this time of year to find a drop-in choir where you can show up and sing the Christmas portion of Handel's Messiah.
- And some people have an annual tradition of watching the Nutcracker ballet, live.
- School choirs and bands are all getting ready for their annual Christmas concerts.
- Amazon is basically sold out of most sizes of kids' Christmas pajamas – parents are getting ready to snap those beautiful Christmas morning photos.
- And speaking of photos, photographers get super-busy this time of year, as families stream in pretty much constantly to get their annual portraits taken for Christmas cards.
- Christmas parties abound...pretty much everywhere.
- I remember, when I was serving in my first church out of seminary I would get pretty grinch-ish this time of year, because my calendar was unrelentingly *insane*. It was a relatively large church, with two pastors, and I dreaded Christmas Eve every year, because the church insisted on having *five* separate Christmas Eve services, running from 2 in the afternoon until midnight, and both of us pastors had to be there for all of them. And we couldn't just re-use the same order of worship five times, either. No. They were all distinct. There was a casual Christmas Eve tea. There was a Contemporary Christmas Eve. There was a family service with a kids' pageant. There was a traditional Christmas Eve candlelight service. And there was a midnight service to ring in Christmas Day. Yeah. By the end of the night, all of the staff were pretty much one big blob of slap-happy, over-caffeinated zombies. And it took me *years* to learn to like Christmas Eve again.

It kind-of reminds me a little bit of a book by John Grisham titled *Skipping Christmas* – it was later made into the movie titled *Christmas with the Kranks*, starring Tim Allen and Jamie Lee Curtis. In this story, Luther and Nora Krank live in a neighborhood that always goes *all out* for Christmas. But one year, when their daughter decides she is not coming home for Christmas, the Kranks just sort-a lose their holiday spirit. They total up how much money they spend on Christmas each year – more than \$6000, when you figure in decorations and their over-the-top Christmas party, and donations to every charity under the sun. And so they decide that this year, they are just going to skip Christmas altogether, and book a cruise to the Caribbean.

Which doesn't go over very well with the neighbors, who are all totally invested in every house on the street doing things up right. And then...surprise! Their daughter calls and has decided that she's coming home after all and is bringing her new fiancé to meet the parents. And so the Kranks have to scramble to throw Christmas together last-minute. Which is no small feat.

Sometimes I think that there is a lot of pressure that we put on ourselves this time of year to make this a magical season. Whether we are feeling nostalgic and want to re-live beautiful Christmas moments from our own childhood, or we have a secret longing to step into a Norman Rockwell Christmas painting, just for a little while, or we confuse the storybook version of Christmas with real life, sometimes our expectations about what Christmas *should* be tend to get set a little bit high. And that can make these few weeks leading up to Christmas a little bit nutty.

Which is why we really need Advent, to slow us down a little bit. To call us back. And to remind us of why we are here, and where we are going.

If you will notice, our scripture reading today is not a reading from the Christmas story (neither was last week's, for that matter). It is a little, short section from the first chapter of Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. At the outset, it couldn't have less to do with Christmas, or Advent, or really much of anything going on this time of year.

In fact, jingle bells and Christmas lights are pretty much the last thing on Paul's mind when he is writing this letter. Because Paul has been arrested. He is sitting in prison, for crimes that he very much did commit. He has called all of his followers (of which there are many) to worship and serve someone other than the Roman emperor. And that was something that you just did not do. When the emperor was basically worshipped like a god, to proclaim that even the emperor's knee shall bow in the presence of God Almighty – that will get you arrested. And it got Paul arrested.

So Paul is sitting in prison, waiting for whatever was going to happen next. Back in that day and age, prison wasn't really seen as a punishment in and of itself. It was basically just a place where they held people temporarily, while they were awaiting whatever came next. Awaiting trial, awaiting release, or awaiting death. Those were basically the

only three options. And the punishment for declaring someone other than Caesar as king, was death. No two bones about it. Paul's future looks bleak.

Which is why it is so interesting that the book of Philippians – the letter that Paul writes from prison, awaiting a probable death sentence – is the most joyful, uplifting thing that Paul ever wrote. And in this first chapter to the Philippians, Paul offers a prayer for his readers – and in this prayer gets down to the heart of what he most longs for: *“This is my prayer: that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless.”*

“I may not be here much longer,” Paul is saying. “So you are going to have to stand on your own two feet. I’m not going to be here to guide you and show you the way anymore. But here’s what I believe: that God will show you where to go and what to do. That God will shape you into the people – into the church – that you are created to be. And I believe this, because I have witnessed your hearts open with love. So as long as your love continues to overflow, that will shape everything that happens from here on out.”

It may be a little bit of a trite Sunday School answer to say that “all we need is love” (dah dah dah dah). But in Paul's case he really means it. And for Paul, love means a whole lot more than just warm, fuzzy feelings. Throughout the entire New Testament, love is not just a feeling; it's not just an action – it is a *person*. More specifically, it is the person of Jesus himself.

I love the way the writer of 1 John put it:

*“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love God does not know God, for **God is love**. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.”*

If we had to boil the entirety of the Christmas message down to one word and one word only, this would have to be it. Love. Plain and simple. God's love for us. A love so deep and so wide and so all-consuming that God would come to earth as one of us. A love so big that it can't be contained within just God – it overflows in us as well. Because when we have seen and known and experienced the love of God, it is a love that we cannot help but to shine to others.

It is so simple. No bells or lights or orchestras or presents or trees – just a powerful message that overflows into hopeless prison cells and dirty barns and lonely fields of sheep; into homes that have an empty chair at the table; and hospital rooms; and homeless shelters. It's a message that shines from the heavens and that bubbles up in the simplest of ways within our hearts. It's where everything begins, and it's where everything ends.

“Love came down at Christmas,” our beautiful, simple, underrated Christmas song for today begins. “Love all lovely, love divine. Love was born at Christmas. Stars and angels gave the sign.”

So the miracle, and all the beauty and the magic and the joy and hope of Christmas – all of it boils down, very simply, to the most basic and yet the most profound message there is: God loves us. More than anything. Love, loves us. How cool is that? And so therefore, we get to verse 3:

Love shall be our token.

Love be yours and love be mine.

Love to God and others.

Love for plea and gift and sign.

(Or, as it was written originally, *Love the universal sign*. I think I actually like that a bit better.)

So whether we decorate to the hilt, or skip Christmas altogether and book a cruise to the Caribbean; whether we make our way through five Christmas Eve services, or one, or for some of you, spend Christmas Eve stuck at home, or in a hospital room, or at work, or miles away from your loved ones; whether we got beautiful Christmas pictures taken this year or handmade all of our Christmas cards or typed out a beautifully-written Christmas letter, or life just got too chaotic and we never really got around to it. Whether we are feeling festive this year, or we are grieving the loss of somebody we loved and are having a hard time “doing” Christmas; whether our Christmas looks like a scene from Norman Rockwell or a scene from Ground Zero of the apocalypse (and let’s be real – for anyone with kids it’s far more likely to be the latter) – no matter what this season holds for us, the profound truth of this season is so simple and so beautiful and so poignant and so strong that it cuts through all of the madness and the insanity and the anxiety and the grief and the panic and the sadness and the expectations; it cuts through all of the “shoulds” and “oughts” and “I wish I could’s”; it cuts through the weariness over the state of life and the state of the world; it cuts its way into prison cells and shopping centers alike.

The message from God to us this season is so simple it’s almost laughable. But it’s that simplicity that I think we need. Something that we can’t overcomplicate.

And here it is – the message from God to us, this day: I love you.
That’s it. The words we most need to hear, and most need to say. I love you.

My friends, I love you. Happy Advent.