

“Channeling Love that never gives up, gives out or dies!”

Romans 12: 9-18, 21

December 19, 2021

Matthew 1: 18-25

One of my favorite books for Christmas is John Grisham’s Skipping Christmas. This was turned into a movie which was NOT as good as the book. The book tells the story of a husband who convinces his wife that they should skip the hassle and expense of Christmas celebrations one year when their daughter is overseas at school. They will save money by not giving gifts or cards or hosting a big Christmas meal for their neighbors, and instead use the money saved to gift themselves with a mid-winter cruise in the Caribbean. Much hilarity and irony ensue as the pastor catches them exiting a tanning salon (in preparation for the cruise), they diet and suffer to fit into swimsuits, and then learn a couple days before Christmas, that their daughter is coming home for Christmas after all, with a doctor fiancée she has met while studying. The husband and wife are then scrambling to find a Christmas tree, put up Christmas decorations, find Christmas dinner foods, and recruit neighbors and friends to come over for the big Christmas dinner which their daughter loves and expects to share with her parents and fiancée. Their neighbors (whose children Blair has babysat) save the holiday, and teach the husband a much needed lesson about what is really at the heart of all our Christmas celebrations!

So do you ever think about skipping Christmas? Or have trouble joining in some of the celebrating? I often find it hard to feel happy about the commercial aspects of Christmas. The advertising focus on buy-buy-buy threatens to drown out the real purpose of Christmas as God demonstrated it for us. And, over these last five years, I get discouraged about the way things are in the world...it seems to have become a meaner, more violent and selfish place. So many people and all creation are suffering needlessly, while the super wealthy live in the lap of luxury and most people slave away

living with next to nothing.... I listen to our young leaders like Greta Thunberg, and want to cry for the broken world we are leaving our children and grandchildren. My heart breaks as these young leaders remind us that we are stealing their future by our greed and negligence in the present. I feel hopeless sometimes, about making a difference anymore...do some of you feel that way? Fatigue pulls me down toward lethargy, apathy, and hiding away from the pain and cries of the suffering in the present...it takes more effort to engage for **good**, in the face of what seems to be greater greed, and greater hatred these days. And yet, are our days that different from the last gasps of the Roman Empire, and the corruption of the powerful religious and political leaders of Jesus' day? Our task is perhaps not so different from that of the first disciples.

It is God's gift of Jesus at Christmas that calls us to channel God's generous love that never gives up, never gives out, and never dies, not even when the real suffering and the fake advertising of our world conspire to try and paralyze us into apathy or depression.

It is the love of God and Christ for us and for all creation – so much so that they come in person in Jesus, that is the miracle of the incarnation, the cross and resurrection. This is the heart of Christmas and Easter, and is the saving mercy and grace that can galvanize us into action for good at Christmas, well beyond just our family and friends.

Joseph and Mary are told of this love when the angel visits them, and this love of God incarnated in Jesus is what spurs them into taking great risks of life, of livelihood, of losing family, friends and even country for a while. This love empowered them, and can empower us to do the unthinkable, attempt the impossible, and achieve the insurmountable: Joseph goes against custom and law to protect Mary, who has become pregnant by God. His standing in the community is shot now – he could become the butt of much salacious gossip--and perhaps even his business could suffer!-- when Mary

returns from Elizabeth's house, showing as pregnant before their marriage. Mary risks her marriage and her life even – will Joseph end their marriage because of this? Will her village stone her for this? Will her family shun her for this? Thanks be to God, literally, Joseph chooses to protect her, and keep her, and adopts this baby under his name and family tree! But both of them have to flee later, to Egypt, when the government hears that a new king might be threatening its authority and power. Thanks be to God again, for the love of shepherds, and foreign visitors, who gift Mary and Joseph with presents to sustain them on their journey, and help them begin a new life as immigrants in Egypt.

This sacrificial, generous Christmas love can strengthen **us** to be bold, and brave, and resolute for what is good and right and truly valuable in life. When we channel God's love, our hearts grow three sizes bigger, and our courage gives us roots and wings, to stand up for our values, and reach high for our dreams. Joseph and Mary channeled God's love – and never gave up on each other or on Jesus; never gave out, as their lives were lived on the edge of safety, on the run to Egypt and back, and on the edge of religious tradition...and their love for Jesus never died, thanks be to God. Mary becomes an important part of the early movement and church.

The heart of Christmas is, of course, the giving of our hearts and love to all whom we meet, as well as family and friends. It's how we channel God and Jesus' love into our world. We incarnate God and Jesus' love in our world when we share cards, gifts, and share our hearts with family and friends, colleagues at parties...we channel that love through our patience, our sacrifices for others, our willingness to go an extra mile to bless another. As Paul describes it in our Romans text: let our love be genuine: outdo one another in showing honor, be ardent in spirit; rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer, contribute to others' needs, and extend hospitality to strangers. Bless others: rejoice and weep with one another, do not repay evil, but live peaceably with all. Do not be overcome by evil,

overcome evil with good. The heart of Christmas is found in the multitude of ways we give our love away, and appreciate and care for others with our deeds, well beyond our words.

We have seen this Christmas love incarnated here already in the abundant generosity you folks have shown through gifts given to the Salvation Army, gifts given toward the Welcome Kit for a Refugee Family (delivered this past Thursday – thank you!), gift cards given for Hessed House and others, food and gifts given for families at Tri-City Family Services. And many of you have gone extra miles beyond that even! Thank you for sharing your hearts in so many ways this Christmas! We are helping families like Joseph and Mary, who are living at risk in our world today, to find hope and help in their time of need.

How might we channel that kind of love in our lives, and in our world even **after** Christmas?! For so many young people, our children and grandchildren, jobs are no longer the ticket to a home and a stable income through retirement. Most often, the jobs available out of college now are low paying, no benefits, and many times not full-time! Making time for church can be an inconvenience or impossible when both parents have to work, and have no free time or energy to cook, clean, much less play with their children after long hours on the job. How can we channel God's sacrificial, generous love that never gives up, never gives out, and never dies, for them? Can **we** find ways to sacrifice, to ease some of their burdens, to show them the love of Jesus that cares about their fatigue, that wants them to know they and their children are precious, valuable parts of our community? What would Jesus do to help them know love and community, amid their horrendous schedules?! Is online worship more helpful? How might these young families guide us to help them build community? Does childcare help? Do play groups help? How can we support them building a network of generous friends? Of wholesome activities for them and their children? Might we speak up in our

communities for affordable housing and neighborhoods, so both parents do NOT have to work fulltime? Might we speak up for jobs that are better paying, offer better benefits, and require fewer hours, create a more sustainable livelihood and retirement for our next generations? Life should not have to be this stressful for anyone, to earn a living wage that can support their family. How can we channel Jesus' love in ways that incarnate hope, peace, joy and love for our young families in church and in our community, beyond Christmastime?!

God comes to us in Jesus to help us find our way back to healthy and helpful beloved community together with creation: our hymn "Joy to the World" reminds us, no more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground – NO MORE gun violence! That is sin! NO more addictions – that is sorrow! NO more thistles! – I mean thorns - infesting the ground?! I can't wait for no more thistles to happen! Seriously, God and Christ and all creation are waiting for us to grab onto their love and channel it back into our lives, and into our families and neighborhoods. What is your favorite way to do that at Christmastime?

My favorite part of Christmas is giving my love away – like we are doing through our church with our gifts and offerings to help others, like when we give gifts to friends and neighbors, like when we send and receive letters sharing news of our lives and our love for others. God's Christmas love compels me to set aside my discouragement and apathy about the endless suffering in the world, to get up and do something about it – to make a difference and show that **my** love never gives up, gives out, or dies. Everything I do channeling Jesus' love can help stem the tide of despair for others, and will help God's love multiply in their lives. And the added blessing? When we shine our light of love to light up someone else's life, their light is lit and brightens our light: our lives are brightened and blessed even more. And, our light of love shared also sparks still others to share their love and light...and brightens up more and more corners of our world.

The movement the disciples started so long ago can still spread and bring blessing today, if we believe, and channel that love into our communities and world today.

I invite us all to unwrap our love and rise up out of our apathy – through our efforts, let us incarnate God’s love in Christ in our church, community and world today! The Christmas hymn “Star-Child” speaks to this call upon our lives: “Star-child, earth-child, go-between of God, love Child, Christ Child, heaven’s lightning rod, this year, this year let the day arrive, when Christmas comes for everyone, everyone alive.” The hymn “There’s a Song in the Air” puts it this way: “We rejoice in the light, and we echo the song that comes down through the night from the heavenly throng...Every hearth is aflame, and the beautiful sing, in the homes of the nations that Jesus is King.” And the last verse of the hymn “Love Came Down at Christmas” which Mike sang so wonderfully for us today, says this: “Love shall be our token, love be yours and love be mine; love to God and all persons, love for plea and gift and sign.” Let us rise up, follow Christ, and set aside our apathy to incarnate and channel the love that Christ gives to our world, so that all may rejoice this Christmas! Alleluia! Amen!