

This Will Be a Sign: #morelove

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Date: 18 December 2022

Preacher: Pastor Cathy Hall Stengel

[0 : 0 0] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[2 : 3 0] Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

On Saturday, Christmas Eve, of course, we will have three services. We have our family service at 4 p.m., and we have services at 7 and at 11. Join us and celebrate the birth of Christ.

As you can be with this particular community. You can join us here. You can also join us online on the 7 o'clock, right? 7 is the online one. So, that being said, let's ready our hearts as we come to worship God together.

Good morning. Good morning. Good morning. Good morning. You may pick up on this this morning.

[5 : 0 9] This is my last morning, my last weekend in service here at Pendleton Center. So, it's very good to be with you. So, it's very good to be with you and to be with those watching online.

And I'm glad that the weather is not frightful anymore. So, welcome to worship this morning. Great to use, please. Good night.

Great, great. The sky was brighter than usual that night. Making it easier to keep track of where the sheep were leading. And where the sheep were going for the shepherds.

And it got really, really bright. You would have thought that all the glory shining would have been enough. Would have been the sign that something bigger than life and death and life everlasting was going to happen. That's what most of us look for. When we imagine God showing up, we expect a big showing. We expect lights and fireworks and all kinds of things.

But instead, God sent a baby. God used the arrival of a newborn, helpless, in a feeding trough after all. God's sign that more love, more love than you can comprehend, is possible for all of us.

[6 : 3 6] There are angels among us that may not meet the eye. There are messages of love coming from a choir on high. But don't just look up, because that's not how God works. Look around, look among us, right here on earth, just like it was with Jesus' birth, not up in the sky, but in a stable with a newborn baby. There are angels among us. There are angels among us, represented by the angels on the trees and you being here among us, bringing love on this earth. So do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. Let us pray. Holy living God, blessed Jesus' guiding spirit.

O grant us openness to hear your message. O grant us openness to hear your message.
O grant us openness to hear your message. And with the angel messengers above us,
among us, and within us, we sing.

O grant us openness to hear your message. And with the angel messengers above us, we
sing. Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place. I can feel his mighty power and his
grace.

I can hear the brush of angels' wings. I see glory on each face. Surely the presence of the
Lord is in this place.

I invite you to stand for our two opening songs. Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates, and
offering.

[8 : 55] Lift up your hands, ye mighty gates Behold the King of glory waits The King of kings is
drawing near The Savior of the world is near Redeemer, come with us a light Our hearts
to Thee we open wide Let us die in the presence feel

Thy grace and love in us reveal Amen Over the skies of Bethlehem appeared a star My
angels hang to the lowly shepherds Three wise men seeking truth Traveled from afar

Hoping to find the child from heaven Falling on their knees They bowed before the humble
Prince of Thieves I bring an offering of worship to my King No one on earth deserves the
praises that I sing Jesus may you receive the honor that you'll do Oh Lord, I bring an
offering to you The sun can I come there to the glory of your love

There is no shadow in your presence No mortal man would dare to stand before your
throne Before the Holy One of Heaven It's only by your heart To your mercy, Lord, I come
I bring an offering of worship to my King No one on earth deserves the praises that I sing
Jesus may you receive the honor that you'll do Oh Lord, I bring an offering to you

Oh Lord, I bring an offering to you I bring an offering of worship to my King No one on
earth No one on earth deserves the praises that I sing Jesus may you receive the praises
that I sing Jesus may you receive the honor that you'll do Oh Lord, I bring an offering to
you Oh Lord, I bring an offering to you Oh, we're bringing an offering to you Oh, we're
bringing an offering to you

[14 : 10] Oh, we're bringing an offering to you Oh, oh, oh, oh You may be seated Good morning I'm
Jennifer I'm one of the pastors here And we're so, so very happy to see you Whether
you're in person or you're here with us online In this season of hope, peace, joy, and love
We're invited and we're asked to go out And be the hands and feet of Jesus in this world
So we ask that you take time in offering this week And think about how our missions in
this church Which is our special mission moment Is for Christmas The missions of our
church Go out and fulfill that calling How we are moving as Jesus in the world Thank you

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[17 : 19] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Good morning. It's great to see all of you here and online. And this morning, before we do
a ritual of farewell to Pastor Kathy, we have a small gift from our church that we want to
give to you.

We did a very wonderful celebration in November, and a lot of things were shared, and we won't take a lot of time this morning, but it's just a brief way and a quick way for us to show how much we love you, and we appreciate the hard, hard work that you did over the last two and a half years, and we celebrate with you and with your daughter, Katie, who's here all the way from Arizona today, so glad to have her as well, and we just want to say thank you and that this comes from all of us and the bottom of our hearts.

[19 : 38] Thank you. Thank you. Can you put the ritual? Okay.

Part of what we do in this denomination is have this ritual of farewell, and so I invite you to share in this with me.

I thank you, members and friends of the Pendleton United Methodist Church, for the love and support you have shown me while I have ministered among you.

I am grateful for the ways that you have accepted my leadership, and I ask for forgiveness for the mistakes that I have surely made. As I leave, I carry with me all that I have learned here.

Who knew that I'd learned COVID so much while I was here? But more than that, all of the ways that my life and heart have been changed by you and your love and care for me.

[20 : 47] We receive your thankfulness, offer forgiveness, and accept that you now lead defensively tired.

We accept our gratitude for your time among us. We ask your forgiveness for our own faith. Your influence on our faith and faithfulness will not lead to your departure.

I accept your gratitude and forgiveness, and I forgive you, trusting that our time together and our parting from one another are pleasing to God.

I release you from turning to me and depending on me, and I encourage your continuing ministry here, and we'll pray for you and for the very excellent pastoral team that you have been blessed with who will continue to lead you in ministry.

Thank you. Now is the time that we go to God with our joys and our concerns, and certainly it is a joy that we have Nan here again playing with us, and that Katie is here visiting.

[22 : 10] So for her mom's last service, she was able to be here. Does anybody have any joys or concerns that they'd like to lift up? Becky. I was here to hear what you do in a generation of unions, but I saw the pictures.

I saw the girls, and I also saw the blessing that those who participated and those who shouldn't be there have provided a lot more care in the night.

You have much to be thankful for what you and the church have done that these two important missions become mothers in need. Thank you.

Okay. If you didn't hear, that was for Angel Wings and the mission that they provided this past month. So able to help lots of families from Lockport Cares and the Madonna House.

So we're definitely thankful for that. Last week I asked for prayers for my niece's son, who's in the hospital with RSV and a couple other viruses.

[23 : 13] He ended up in intensive care for five days, but he is out of intensive care and out of the hospital. Prayers have worked and been answered, and he's helped him and well. So thank you.

So for her niece's son, who last week we prayed for, he was in the hospital with RSV. He went into ICU, but he is home now, so that is certainly something to celebrate. Melissa.

A member of this congregation, I'm not going to say who it is, but her husband has dementia, and she's struggling with her kids, accepting that he needs more help than she can give him, and she needs more support for her decisions from her kids.

So prayers for a member of the congregation who is going through some rough times and helping her family understand the help that her and her family need because her husband has dementia.

My mother-in-law, Joyce, was placed in hospice this week. Okay. So mother-in-law, Joyce, was placed in hospice this week, so we need to keep that family in our prayers.

[24 : 21] Okay. So I have to do this. My cousin, my cousin, my cousin, lost her mother-in-law this past week. Okay. So it's so hard.

And my aunt has a cancer tumor in her eyes that she was able to help her body to go to her. Okay. All right. So prayers for healing an aunt with a cancerous tumor in her eye.

Is that what was the? And her cousin lost her mother-in-law. So make sure that we keep them in our prayers. Yes. Okay.

Okay. Continued prayers for your nephew. So, all right. Aha.

34 years. Okay. All right. Will you join your hearts with mine in prayer?

[25 : 30] Heavenly Father, we thank you for the joys that we've lifted up. We thank you for family who has been able to come and travel and those who will be traveling this week.

We ask that you guard them and keep them safe. God, there are so many people struggling in this world with mental illness, the need for family to understand concerns, and just the sadness that sometimes Christmas brings.

Bring love and joy and peace into our hearts. We lift our concerns to you, God, because you can answer as no one else can.

We thank you for bringing your son, Jesus Christ, as a light into this world to show us how to live, to show us how to be, to show us how to carry your light and your work into the world.

We pray for our church and our families. We pray for those who are not able to be home this Christmas, for those military members who are overseas or people who just can't get home.

[26 : 51] We pray for those who are struggling with relationships and that just are feeling the loss this Christmas time.

Wrap them in your arms. Wrap them with your love and your peace. In your name we pray. Amen. Good morning.

Good morning. Today's reading comes from Luke, chapter 2, verses 1 through 20. In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

This was the first census that took place while Aquinarius was governor of Syria, and everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.

He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.

[28 : 19] She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no guest room available for them. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.

Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is the Messiah. The Lord, this will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, and praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.

[29 : 23] So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby, who was wrapped and lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. The fourth Sunday in Advent.

The Sunday that we have the candle of love, the circle is now complete around the center candle. The center candle, which you may have figured out, is the Christ candle, and that will be lit on Christmas Eve.

But we have hope, peace, joy, and love surrounding that candle, waiting for the moment when we celebrate once again the birth of the Christ child.

[30 : 57] This love thing, this love that we celebrate today, we think about, well, of course.

This is how it works. God loves us. God sends Jesus. We love Jesus. We love God. God, it's all good. Christmas, we think, is the same year after year after year.

I'd like to invite us to consider that each year, when we think this is the year, we need it the most.

The next year, we need it the most even more. I have watched over the last several weeks as people have come together, as people have come together, like last Sunday evening, when we gathered in a celebration of music and delight, and saw how people's faces were shining with reunion, being with people they hadn't seen.

The time over the last few years has taken a lot from everybody. Babies have been born that we didn't meet. They were months or maybe more than months old.

[32 : 14] Couples got married with 10 people here in this sanctuary. Babies were baptized with a computer sitting on a stand while on Zoom.

Some of their godparents and family participated in the baptism, but they weren't here. Who would have thought that we would have found a way?

And yet, now, almost three years ago, it'll be three years ago, I'm going to say in February, February or March, thereabouts, I can't remember, when I met with our SPRC from a hotel room in Las Vegas to be welcomed into ministry here at Pendleton Center and also at Niagara Falls.

And I met Louis and Todd Fisher. After we started working, you can't imagine the work that we were doing unless you were on that team that was all about protecting the safety of everybody in church.

And, oh my goodness, the prayers and the worry and all of that and the rules and the restrictions. And, yet, we tend to take things like love and make them kind of soft and hallmark kind of things.

[33 : 54] Maybe, if I asked you this question, what's the most common passage read at weddings? 1 Corinthians 13. 1 Corinthians 13, just to remind you, is often called the love chapter.

And, I'm not going to read all of it, but, it's the chapter that talks about what love is. If I speak in tongues of men and angels, but don't have love, I'm a clanging gong or a clashing cymbal.

It goes on to talk about if I have all the gifts of prophecy and can tell all about the future, but have love, I am nothing. And, then, it goes on to talk about, well, what is love?

Love is patient, kind, it's not jealous, it doesn't brag, it isn't arrogant, it isn't rude, it doesn't seek its own advantage, it isn't irritable, and it goes on and on.

Love never fails. As for everything else, they will pass, but love never fails. And, it goes on to talk about how, at the end of the day, faith, hope, and love remain, these three things, but the greatest of these is love.

[35 : 14] And, while the scripture passage this morning speaks of the angels coming, and the angels coming, and the heavenly hosts singing, which is all about love, because, remember, John 3, 16, God so loved the world that he sent his only son, Jesus Christ, as a baby, that we may have life, and not death.

so, this chapter of 1 Corinthians 13 is often, in historical, biblical work, thought of as sort of a hallmark card right in the middle of Paul's teaching.

Paul's teaching the Corinthians about how they should live and how they should not live. If you read the chapters ahead of it, it is a lot of instruction, stay away from this, don't do that.

And people look at this love chapter and they're like, what's up with this? Like, maybe Paul's having a little glass of wine and gotten a little soft and sentimental, kind of like the fourth Sunday in Advent.

But the truth is, as biblical scholars will say, this is not the fluffy chapter.

[36 : 39] This may as well be the only chapter. Because the connection from God creating the world, God sending disciples and prophets and pastors and teachers, and then Jesus coming.

Did God have to do that? God does not have to do anything. And yet, God decided to show up in the form of a baby.

To show up in the form of this very small infant crying in the night because he might have been Jesus, but he was a baby.

He had to have diaper changes and the whole nine yards. So, of course, he cried. God did not have to do that.

Why did God do that? Because God loves us, you, me, all who are listening, all who might be touched by the word or the star or a light to come closer.

[37 : 57] That's why God sent this child. Through the years, and it just happens that my son just walked in the door.

Katie, wave your hand so he can come up and sit with you. Not that the front is generally his style, but 40 years ago, when I was serving my very first church in 1983, Christmas Eve came and there was a blizzard.

And I was a new pastor. I had never done Christmas Eve before. I had never done Christmas Eve before. Did I mention I'd never done Christmas Eve? I wasn't even sure I'd ever been to church on Christmas Eve.

And now, I was in charge, 26 years old, and they put me in charge. And one of the churches that I was serving, Canadiast United Methodist Church, which is near Canadiast Lake, if you're familiar with that, we're standing in the entranceway of this very small church, basically a little vestibule, and then the sanctuary, and then the basement.

That's all there was. And I was kind of a little anxious and getting ready for the service to start. And the front doors opened, somebody was coming in, the snow's flying in because it's blizzarding outside, and this couple comes in, and their parents, one of their parents, who was a part of Canadiast United Methodist Church, and they shake the snow off themselves, and the daughter of the couple takes off this cape that she was wearing, a cape like a winter coat, and she takes it off, and underneath is a baby that she's holding in a carrier tucked up against her body.

[40 : 03] The baby had traveled from Korea to New York City, to Rochester, to this couple who had waited so desperately for a child, and then they drove to church because they couldn't imagine any place else they would want to be because they knew the waiting, they knew the wondering, they knew the darkness of needs not met, and yet they persevered, and they believed, and this child was delivered to them, and it was not the Christ child, but to them, it was the greatest gift they could ever imagine, imagine, and I was overwhelmed, overwhelmed, being moved by them arriving that night, and what some of the congregation knew and some didn't is that I was pregnant with our oldest child.

wanted. wanted. wanted. Some of the places we travel in this world get lost in the darkness.

somebody dinged, not me. Sometimes the snow is frightful, sometimes the nights are dark.

I have not seen the movie or the show of Dear Evan Hansen, but I have listened to one of the songs, and Natalie Grant also performed the song, and the song is You Will Be Found, and she sang it as a Christian song.

She sang it as a song encouraging that we would all be found by Christ. The song is the words talk about the places and the times when we might have felt like no one was there.

[42 : 31] The places and the times when we thought no one could even see us. The places and the times we wondered what our purpose was. Why we were here.

What are we up to? Where is God anyway? The places and the times all of humanity, not all at the same time, find themselves wondering, God, are you here?

God, do you really love me? Because I don't feel it. I don't know it. And some people are not feelers. They're knowers. So they often don't lean into the feeling of being loved.

out of the shadows. The morning is breaking. All is new. All is new. It's filling up the empty and suddenly I think is new.

Even when the dark comes crashing through, when you need a friend to carry you, when you're broken on the ground, you will be found. So when the sun comes streaming in, you'll reach up and you'll rise again.

[43 : 47] If only you look around, you will be found. That, my friends, is why God sent a baby.

Because God knew that people were lost and did not know the love of Jesus Christ. They didn't know the love of God. So he sent Jesus a touchable experience creating savior of the world.

Someone that people could watch, people could touch, people could be fed by and here we are generations and hundreds and thousands of years later and we still need it.

People are still not seeing it, not feeling it. And here's at the end of the day what I believe.

I believe in God's grace for impossible things. I believe in God's love for impossible people, for impossible situations.

- [45 : 03] there is no situation that is outside of the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Nothing. There is no personal choice that you or I could make in muddying up our lives along the way.
- No mistake that we can make that God can't forgive and help us through. And the secret to unwrapping the biggest, greatest, grandest gift is to believe that God loved us this much that he sent his only son.
- God can use anything, anyone, because God can show his uncontainable love through me, through an infant, through the snow, the light, the day, the darkness, high walls and hard hearts are no match for the love of God.
- Sin and badness, you probably don't hear that word badness, they're no match for the love. It's not the fluffy chapter it's the only chapter.
- It's the chapter that tells us how to live, what love is and what love isn't. The love of God can climb over any wall and open the door of any heart and find anyone, anywhere, anytime, no matter what.
- [46 : 51] God told me to say yes to come here three years ago, a little less than three years ago.
- We didn't know each other. I knew Tom and Jackie, so I knew some of what to expect. I didn't know how to run a church during COVID.
- did you Louis? Did you Scott? No. We didn't.
- But in those initial relationships and contacts, we found our way. And along the way, people got mad, people got sad, people left, people came back, all kinds of things happened, and it was filled with all of the feelings.
- But if I could wish, not but, I do wish and pray for this, that no matter what the days ahead bring, no matter what feelings rise in you around life, around relationships, around church, and your idea of what it should be or shouldn't be, know this.
- [48 : 20] Faith, hope, and love abide. The greatest of these is love. And the deliverance of that love is Jesus Christ, a child born in Bethlehem, who came to remind us there is no greater love.
- And if we can bring that into those feelings, feelings of inadequacy, feelings of frustration, feelings of anger, relationships, jobs, whatever it might be, if we feel the love for ourselves, then we will be changed, and we will then likewise change the world.
- May it be so. Amen. As we ready ourselves to experience God's love in a fresh way, as we are reminded of God's love poured out for us, let's open our hearts as we prepare to come to the Lord's table, as we experience another expression of that love.
- The Lord be with you. Lift up your hearts. Let us give thanks to the Lord, our God. In the beginning, you set everything in motion, creator of heaven and earth.
- With bold creativity, you splashed the sky with light and stars, with sun and moon, with wind and clouds, with rain and rainbows, and with winged ones.
- [50 : 23] With the words, you brought forth the waters, the waves, the mountains, and the valleys. And you called forth our lives from the dust, and called it good.
- And so, we proclaim this ancient song with all the saints and the angels. Holy, holy, holy God, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory.
- Hosanna in the highest. Blessed are you, blessed are you. You sent your son, Jesus, your message made flesh to dwell among us, harbinger of hope, prince of peace, cup of joy, bread of love.
- Through Jesus, you gave birth to your church and sealed a new covenant by water and the spirit. And on the night in which he gave himself up for us, he took bread.
- He gave thanks to you. He broke the bread and he gave it to his disciples and he said, take and eat. This is my body which is given for you.

[51 : 38] Do this in remembrance of me. And the supper was over, he took the cup and gave thanks to you. And he gave it to his disciples and he said, drink from this, all of you, for this is my blood, sign of the new covenant.

It's poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sin. Every time that you drink it, do this in remembrance of me. And so, as we anticipate the birth of love anew, we proclaim the mystery of faith.

Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. Touch us, O Spirit, and these gifts. With your transforming power, open us to your promise of resurrection from fear and death.

In partaking of these elements, make us a people ready as your body for an anxious world. Let us become your messengers of hope in all that we say and do.

Make us one in this purpose, O God. Make us one in your Son, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

[52 : 58] Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

who is who is the thing Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you.

[55 : 43] Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

[59 : 17] Thank you.

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Thank you.

[61 : 47] Thank you.

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[64 : 17] Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

[67 : 29] I'd like to invite you all, following the service, to come to a reception for Pastor Kathy in the Fellowship Hall.

So please stop in and have a piece of cake. Adrienne, you want to play that video?

Is he back there? What the world needs now is love, sweet love.

It's the only thing that there's just to be love. What the world needs now is love.

Now, as we go from this place, and I will send them out one at a time. Hope. Go ahead. Peace.

[68 : 37] Joy. And love. As the lights lead the way to Bethlehem, may you know that you will always be found, and God will always show you the way home.

Go in peace and gratitude, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.