

Love Came Down at Christmas

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Welcome to my dining room table and my advent wreath here on the table. Last week I lit the candle of hope and this morning I light the candle of love.

So this is the week of love. Most of us know about love. We know especially how to love often. Some people haven't had the experience of being truly loved and I'm reminded of a couple of hymns this morning. The first one is called Love Came Down at Christmas and it is number 242 in the United Methodist Hymnal. Now I wouldn't, I don't think the tune even comes to mind. But what I love, listen to me using the word love, are the words.

The first verse, love came down at Christmas. Love all lovely, love divine. Love was born at Christmas.

Star and angels gave the sign. And then it says, worship we the Godhead, love incarnate, love divine.

Worship we our Jesus, but wherewith for a sacred sign. Love shall be our token, be yours, and love be mine.

[1 : 47] Oh, let me say that again. Love shall be our token, love be yours, and love be mine. Love to God and all mankind, love for plea and gift and sign. Some of those words might sound a little awkward. Well, it was written in 1885. And so, you know, it just doesn't kind of roll off your tongue, except for love came down at Christmas. Next to that, I have to say that there have been a couple of songs that have been on repeat on my playlist on the music I listened to from my phone.

One of them was sung by Nancy Himes this past Sunday at church, Breath of Heaven. And I had known that song.

But then after I heard Nancy sing it, I had to go find it and listen to it and listen to it and listen to it. That sense of how Mary felt as she was asked to carry this child of God.

The other one, which I used to think of as more of a maybe gray and cloudy kind of hymn, and you'll understand that when I tell you what it is. It's called In the Bleak Midwinter.

In the Bleak Midwinter. Frosty wind made moan. Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone.

[3 : 37] Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow. In the bleak midwinter long ago. Our God, heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain. Heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign.

In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed. The Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ. Angels and archangels may have gathered there. Cherubim and seraphim thronged the air.

But his mother only in her maiden bliss, worshipped beloved with a kiss. What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.

If I were a wise man, I would do my part. Yet what can I give him? Give him my heart. Now, part of the reason that hymn has been on my mind is because there's a sound in it when it talks about snow on snow on snow.

And there's just something beautiful about it. And I don't think I ever thought about it as a moving piece of music. Because don't we have enough bleakness already that we wouldn't necessarily choose to listen to a hymn or a song called In the Bleak Midwinter.

[5 : 11] And yet, in this season of snow and sort of cold outside, in this week of the Advent candle of love, in this time of COVID and struggles, chaos in places around us, it does feel kind of bleak at times.

And yet, the hymn goes on to talk about it was in this bleak midwinter that Jesus came. It was in this bleak midwinter that love came down at Christmas.

It is in this space of uncertainty that love showed up in our world. I'm sure that from the beginning of time, God had a plan.

A plan for when Jesus would come to be among us. And I'm sure that God's plan ended up being exactly what God had planned.

Could God have known how much in the dark of the night, when Jesus was born to Mary and Joseph, how much the world needed that love, needed a savior, needed a sign?

[6 : 54] I think God, of course, God knows now.

That as the snow on snow on snow falls, that you and I, we need a sign from God.

A sign from God that love is still here and that God loves us that much. God loves us that much. Not to use a virus like COVID to teach us a lesson, but rather to care for us and love on us in a time in this broken world where there is a virus called COVID-19.

There have been questions and questions since the beginning of time about pain and suffering, just like there have been questions and concerns since the beginning of time about what does it mean to be loved by God? How do we even know we're loved by God? And what does it mean to love other people? And we read in the Bible about, well, love God and love your neighbor and love yourself.

And we hear people talk about, well, you can't give what you don't have. And if you don't have love, then what do you do? How do you give it? I have mixed feelings about some of that.

[8 : 38] I think sometimes we love because we can. We love because it reminds us what love feels like, even on the days when we don't feel it ourselves. I think that God sent Jesus. And I think we do these Advent rituals every year, hope and this week love to remember just how much God loves us.

One of the writers that I like, and she produces all kinds of art and cards. I bought some of her Christmas cards a few years ago. And this is my paraphrase of her Christmas card. Listen to this.

That was part of the mystery, wasn't it? The love that was always there, even in the darkness, even when it was really hard to see and to find. That love was always there. Offering love and light light from the inside to the mysterious outside. An opening of our hearts wide enough to believe in the mystery of a love that always was, and I will say always will be.

I was thinking last night about all the ways that church people have loved on each other throughout the years. Batches and batches and batches of Christmas cookies. Ornaments made and delivered.

People gathering around festive tables. People going out to lunch or to dinner or going out after a church meeting. I've heard that that happens here, or at least it did, and it will, but just not this year. Most of our ways of feeling loved and loving other people has to do with being together. Has to do with sitting around a table like this. Sitting in the family room in front of the fireplace, sitting somewhere. Last week I talked about us looking at the Christmas lights in people's houses. And as we go around or look out our window and we see those lights, I invited you to to see them and feel them as the light of Christ, the hope of the world, burning out in the world everywhere for us to see.

[11 : 51] This week when we talk about love, I invite us to remember, to tell the stories, to get on the phone, or get on FaceTime, or somehow get in each other's presence and talk about the times around the table, the goofy presents. Last night at the end of the finance meeting we did a gift exchange of kind of fun and funny stuff.

I ended up with some really neat glasses that have a snowman on them and it says, let the meltdown begin.

There were other things that were amusing and entertaining. We did that because we knew that we could do it safely.

And we knew that there needed to be some laughter. There needed to be a time of a time of doing something that is normal. So we can't have a lot of normal this year, but it's not gone.

It's just gone from this space. It's not gone. It's just not happening in this moment, in this space, in time.

[13 : 25] And just like we read in the hymnal, just like we read in scripture about the world that God created and the love that God sent in Jesus Christ, this love that came down at Christmas in the midst of a bleak midwinter, this love, it will see us through this season of different and hard.

It will see us through the disappointments, not making everything better as much as we wish that it would, at least not right this minute. The love of God isn't going to change the fact that it's not a good idea to get groups of people together over food and beverages and in party kind of situations.

But love is what will sustain us between now and when we are together again. So whether you're finding yourself at home with one candle that maybe you can light, whether it's a real light candle or one like I have here in my windows.

Let's see. I think I probably need the... There it goes. It's still a candle. It's still a candle.

And my invitation this year, this week of love, is to go once again to the lights.

[15 : 09] The lights we see, the lights we light, the lights we see, the lights we see, the lights we see. And be reminded that it was God's love that came at Christmas.

It's still God's love that comes this year, even in the midst of a bleak midwinter. God knows where you are and God knows how you're feeling and how I might be feeling and how the distances feel between us and our families feel between us and our families. God knows. And God wants to love us through this time.

But God wants us to use that. So I invite you, talk to one person this week and remember stories of love and laughter.

Talk to one person and remember maybe someone who won't be with you at Christmas. That might make you cry, but it also makes that person so very near to you.

Because while they're gone in body, they are not gone from our lives. They will be a part of that always. Talk to one person.

[16 : 31] If it's one person this week or one person every day this week, take that step. You're worth it.

You are important enough to call someone and have some time to be reminded. Maybe we can't do dinner.

Maybe we can't go out. Maybe we can't have a house full of friends and family. But we will love. Joseph loved.

Mary certainly loved. The disciples loved. People who have claimed Jesus as their savior throughout the generations. They love.

They love. And they have a sense that they are loved. Maybe it takes a candle for you to light. And in the light of that candle, maybe you could offer this prayer.

[17 : 42] And I'm going to do this with my eyes open. Lord, as I look into this candle, into this Christmas light, remind me once again that your love came down at Christmas.

And year after year, snow on snow on snow, you come once again to love me.

And I give you thanks for that. In Jesus, Jesus, Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Blessings to you this day.

Stay safe. Stay warm. Stay healthy. And remember how much you are loved. Take care.