

Advent Week 4

REDISCOVERING LOVE IN OUR DIFFERENCES

The fourth Sunday of Advent signifies love and reminds us that Jesus was sent to us because of God's great love for us. For the next seven days we will rediscover and experience God's amazing love. Along with the daily devotions, take time this week to light the fourth candle in your Advent wreath. Let this reality be your focus this week no matter what else you are going through: Jesus is God's love embodied in our world and infused into our lives to heal us and draw us together. Experience the depth of His love and allow that love to overflow to others in grace and unity. Let love fill your days and nights as Christmas draws close!



So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was 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. — Luke 2:16-20

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. — John 3:16



How do you usually like to let people know you love them?
When do you feel most loved by others?



And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

—Ephesians 3:17-19



“Hark! The Herald Angels Sing”

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LOVE HONORS OTHERS

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.

—Romans 12:9-10

They were a young couple, eking out a living in New York City. They had each other but little else. Oh, and their most prized possessions: Jim’s gold pocket watch that had been his grandfather’s and Della’s beautiful, cascading hair. Both had secretly tried saving for months to buy a Christmas present for the other, but \$1.87 was all Della had. In a moment of Christmas Eve inspiration, Della sold her hair for \$20 to buy Jim a perfectly simple gold chain to match his pocket watch. As Jim arrived home, Della feared he would no longer find her beautiful. He held his wife close and gave her a set of combs she had long admired. “My hair grows so quickly,” she told him. At least there was the perfect watch chain, which she excitedly gave him. Jim smiled as he told her he had sold the watch in order to buy her combs. “Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are the most wise,” wrote O’Henry to close his famous 1905 story *The Gift of the Magi*. “Everywhere they are the wise ones. They are the magi.”

Is there a love more sincere than that which puts another first? Jim and Della didn’t give gifts to each other out of compulsion or obligation. They didn’t think twice about sacrificing their most prized possession to bring happiness to their true love. Their spirit is the same as that of the Magi, who gave freely to Jesus. The Magi are the source of our practice of Christmas gift giving. And, of course, theirs and our gifts are just a reflection of God’s gift of Jesus. His love in action through us, as Paul describes in Romans, is sincere, good, devoted, and honors others before ourselves.

What gift are you most excited to give this Christmas? What other way can you honor someone above yourself in this season, even without money or means?

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LOVE DEFEATS FEAR

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.
—1 John 4:18

There are a lot of things that could have kept those wisemen at home. Most of them would have come down to fear. There was fear of the unknown: a new star, a journey to a new land wherever this star would lead them. There was fear for their safety: Traveling the harsh, desert roads of the ancient Middle East was a dangerous venture. Besides the inhospitable terrain for you and your vehicles, aka livestock, you had to stay vigilant against robbers or warlords. The Magi could have easily feared loss. We know they carried gold, frankincense, and myrrh to give to Jesus. It seems they were wealthy. They must have been a target to would-be assailants. Fear of ridicule could have kept them at home. What if they were wrong about this star? They would have had hours and hours to second-guess themselves as they plodded onward. Fear of power could have derailed them or thwarted their mission as they were called before the mighty ruler Herod.

Fear could not stop the Magi. Nothing would stop them on their mysterious journey. They came as if called. They came to worship and give powerfully symbolic gifts—gifts fit for a king—to the infant Jesus. They also came as representatives of the message that the gift of Jesus is for every race, every people, every nation. Love thrives in the absence of fear. And as John describes, perfect love drives out fear. The love of God embodied in Jesus fills us with the courage to cross borders and face danger and discomfort. It frees us from insecurity and rejection and judgment. It frees us from the divisive fear of the other and brings us together, united as God's children.

What fears are troubling your heart? How can you step out against fear, empowered by God's perfect love?

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UNFAILING LOVE

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

—Romans 8:38-39

The Great Plague was London’s last major outbreak of bubonic plague, but it claimed as many as 100,000 lives from 1665 to 1666. It spread to the Derbyshire village of Eyam, about 160 miles north of London, in a bale of cloth infested with carrier fleas. Forty-two villagers died in September and October. The plague had been killing millions of Europeans for centuries. These villagers didn’t understand all of the science, but they knew the plague spread from person to person. By spring, the remaining citizens prepared to flee their homes to survive.

But the newly appointed rector, William Mompesson, with the help of the trusted former rector, Thomas Stanley, convinced the villagers to remain and quarantine themselves in their village. By staying, they knew they were choosing death, but they knew they would also avoid spreading the plague to other villages. They chose to protect the lives of others beyond their own boundaries. Death hit Eyam hard, killing 260 of its 300-800 inhabitants in a year. “It must have been terrifying, but every single family would have had that strong belief in God, and would not have feared death,” Joan Plant, Eyam churchwarden and direct descendant of one of the survivors, told the BBC.

The citizens of Eyam must have clung to the truth of Paul’s words, that nothing in all the universe or eternity can separate us from God’s love, not even death. Despite suffering and grief, they chose to love and protect their neighbors in nearby villages even more than themselves. They knew they were held firmly in the embrace of God’s love no matter what.

What feels like it is separating you from the love of God? If there is truly nothing that will break the bonds of God’s love for you, what courageous step will you take?

25

LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.
—John 13:34-35

Harley Davidson riders are known by their leathers. Surfers are known for their board shorts. Gangs identify by their colors. You can spot a Las Vegas Raiders fan by the black and silver skulls. A cheese hat? You're loyal to the Green Bay Packers. You knew Groucho Marx by his glasses and bushy mustache. Abraham Lincoln's top hat was a dead giveaway. Early punk-rockers were recognizable by their three-foot mohawks. Flannel was the '90s mark of grunge rockers. Handlebar mustaches now reveal a hipster. Braided beards and ruthlessness? Pirates. Reggae and dreadlocks often reveal a Jamaican, mon. Brazilians are known for their expressive warmth.

What are Christians known for? Jesus said it should be our love for other people. Early on, the church shone with Christlike love as believers shared all they had to care for each other's needs. When pandemics hit Roman cities, Christ followers chose to tend to the sick even while the persecuting Romans fled. But there have been clear collective blunders, like invading countries and killing innocent women and children during the Crusades.

So how are we doing now? Are our churches known for who we're trying to keep out or who we are welcoming in? Are we known by our service or our self-preservation? Our willingness to listen or our quickness to shout down? Our devotion to our political party or our devotion to Jesus? Does our encouragement or criticism come through louder? Are we marked by anger or grace? Outrage or compassion? Are we recognized by our expressions of Christ's love or our indignation about what others call the holiday? Are we too busy to show love and kindness in our daily interactions? Let's let everyone know we are Jesus's disciples this Christmas by our love for others.

What do others know you for? What can you do to put Jesus's love into action?

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LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.
—Matthew 5:43-44

From a distance, the priest thought it must be roadkill left by wild animals. But as he drew closer, he heard humanlike moaning, and he could tell it was a man's bloodied body. Robbers had done this, stealing all the man had and leaving him to die. The priest moved as far away as he could. "He's almost dead anyway," he thought. "I don't have time for this." He hurried on. The next man who passed reacted similarly. "I can't get involved with this unclean mess," thought the priestly assistant as he veered around the scene of the crime. The third man who eventually came along was a Samaritan who immediately stopped. After some first aid, he lifted the victim onto his donkey and transported him into the city. He treated the man's wounds all day and night, then paid the innkeeper to continue. "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor?" asked Jesus. "The one who had mercy on him," the expert in the law replied (Luke 10:36-37).

Did you ever notice the man trying to prove a point to Jesus couldn't even bring himself to say the word Samaritan? That's because the Jews hated the Samaritans. The prejudice went back thousands of years in their shared ancestry when the tribes of Jacob split. Talk about a grudge! The groups had fought battles and disagreed about worshiping God (the Samaritans had their own temple, as if the Jews would have let them in at Jerusalem anyway).

But when Jesus told a story to illustrate God's command to love your neighbor as yourself, He flipped the religious teachings on their head. The hated Samaritan lived out God's love. He loved his enemy. He pleased God. And as Jesus taught, God's love and salvation are for everyone, enemies included. There is freedom in loving others, even those we don't like.

Who do you have trouble loving? How can you reach out to them with love this week?

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LOVE RESPONDS

We love because he first loved us.

—1 John 4:19

The young girl was traveling from her Mexican village to the nearby chapel to visit the **Nativity scene**. Pepita was upset because she had no money to buy a gift to offer the baby Jesus during the service. But as she walked, she picked a bouquet along the roadside—weeds really. She was discouraged at her lack, but her cousin reminded her that even the most humble gift given in love would be acceptable in God’s eyes. When Pepita brought her offering to the Christ child, her bouquet miraculously transformed into beautiful red flowers, known as *cuetlaxochitl*—poinsettias.

Our own Christmas tradition of giving and displaying poinsettias comes from Mexico. The first U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, Joel Roberts Poinsett, brought the plant home in 1828 to study and cultivate it. He began giving them to friends as the lovely red flowers bloomed around Christmas, and a Pennsylvanian botanist soon began growing and selling them as the tradition spread.

The original legend of Pepita reminds us of human love’s humble response to God’s love. “We love because he first loved us.” When we are able to receive God’s love, in all of its unconditional fullness, we are able to be vulnerable, accepted, and unashamed. We are aware there is nothing we can do to deserve this love. We understand our frailty and our smallness. There is nothing we can give to impress God, but all He wants is us. There is freedom in this realization, freedom to receive His love and to offer it back. There is even freedom to pass this love on to others, as John continues to write in 1 John 4. Our love is not an obligation or a duty we must grit our teeth and force. It is a renewing fountain continually flowing from the source of love Himself. Let’s drink deeply from the true source of love this Christmas and rediscover its refreshing flow.

Do you feel loved? How can you remind yourself throughout the day of God’s unfailing, never-ending love for you?

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LOVE BLOWS OUR MINDS

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.
—Ephesians 3:17-19

There is so much we don't know about the universe. Google “mysteries of the universe” and you can easily go down a black hole, pun intended, of mind-blowing topics. What goes on in black holes, with gravity so powerful and dense that not even light can escape? What exactly is dark matter and how does it work to hold fast-moving galaxies together? And what about dark energy that seems to be pushing the universe apart, expanding more and more quickly? Incredible imagery from the orbiting Hubble Telescope, Chandra X-ray Observatory, and infrared Spitzer Space Telescope has revealed exploding supernovae like the Crab Nebula, as well as thousands of other galaxies across deep space. It seems the more astronomers and physicists discover, the more there is that we don't understand. Maybe we never will.

For our God who is infinite and eternal, nothing is impossible. And if He is the Creator of a potentially infinite universe, then love is in and of His entire cosmic work, wherever His presence reaches, without end. Is your mind bending yet? And we think the oceans are deep! This is the same endless love embodied and extended to us in Jesus. Paul says the love of Christ surpasses knowledge. Nothing can contain it. Everything pales in comparison to it: our pains and problems, our complaints and questions, even our very existence and universe. Let's open our hearts as widely as possible to God's unfathomable love in this season and always.

What is your concept of eternity? What will you do to let your mind and heart be blown by God's all-consuming love this Christmas?