

Sermon December 20, 2009

What Love Chooses As the Way to Live

Psalm 80:1-7 Micah 5:2-5 John 3:11-21

Two times in Psalm 80, in a time of great distress and trouble for the Hebrew people, the psalmist cries out – “ restore us, O God, let your face shine that we may be saved.”

And in the dark streets of Bethlehem, 500 years later, and 2000 years ago now, in the face of the boy child of Mary, in the darkness, shined the everlasting light. And the darkness, at no time, despite all manner of sinfulness, has never shut out that light.

That light of God’s love for God’s creation, for the people made by God in God’s Image, shines and shines – and lights the way, and the best ways, for anyone to live.

The light that shone from the face of Jesus, that brightened the dark streets of Bethlehem, that light was and is the sign of God’s love.

But this year, again this year, it would be fair to ask just how brightly that light of Christmas, that light of God’s love , given to us in Christ, is shining in our lives? What signs do you see of love’s light in our world? What signs do you see in your life?

What gives you confidence this Christmas 2009, that the hopes and fears of all the years – or even just your hopes and fears this year, were met, and still are met, by that Babe of Bethlehem town?

If Christmas is about God’s love – for the world, and for you, what does, or what should love, love shining for us in the face of Jesus, what should that love do for us and, also, lead you and lead me to do?

Please pray with me.

It’s true Lord, we feel it, we sing it, love came down at Christmas, all lovely and divine... But can we feel it now, Lord, can we find it now God, in the crazy time called the Holidays? Speak, Lord, your good word, thru my words and through the thoughts of these your loving and faithful people, that we may hear and know anew all the wonder of this season and the power of your love for us in Christ. Amen.

If Christmas is about love, hope, peace, joy and Love - Christmas seems to lead us to do some pretty strange and not necessarily loving or lovely things. Judging from the behavior of traffic at the mall I visited, while there were plenty of chances for people to show a little love – few chances were taken to actually do so. It was every driver for him or herself, and every parking place a war zone. Where I was, was not a love fest at all.

And in this Christmas season, we've been hounded by the news and gossip of love gone sour - the most well know athlete in the world - athlete of the decade some voted - the Tiger - has - by his actions torn the fabric of love in his marriage to shreds.

And - if out of the mouths of babes comes truth, then love and Christmas may be a long way from each other. A Sunday School teacher wanted to help her children appreciate the meaning of the holidays, and discovered some pretty crass views.

She said this to her children - Thanksgiving - that's the day when we think about all the stuff we can have, and how we want more than other people have, and we don't care as much about what others have as what we get. And one bright little girl shouted out - no teacher, no, that's Christmas.

That's Christmas.?

And yes - sadly - I suspect in too many ways that is the Christmas we have created. The holiday of conspicuous consumption. And in this Holiday the light of love can hardly be seen against the almost blinding glare of our greed.

And I'm sorry for this Grinch like rundown of Christmas. But Christmas, the heart of Christmas, is not the blown up extravaganza of spending and partying we've let it become. It really is, it really is, at the heart of it, from those dark streets of Bethlehem 20being00 years ago, to the dark streets of our own city's, or war torn Iraq, or war torn Bethlehem today, it really is, Christmas really is, about the shining light of love alive in our world, living in our hearts, longing to find new expression through our lives.

That's the true spirit of Christmas - where the light of love shines. It did in Bethlehem town, long, long ago. Shepherds experienced it. Wise men sought it out. And in the life of that boy child Jesus, that light of love, God's love, began to penetrate the life of the world in life changing ways.

Yes, God so loved the world that God gave God's only son, so that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. But the light of that love too often seems to be one flicker of candle light, one breath of more worldliness, from going out.

It stuns me how the message, the light and truth of the Christian message, has come so close to being lost in our society? Even in the dark days of our sinfulness - in the midst of WW I, with 2 strongly Christian nations at war - On Christmas eve at the front lines in France, the two armies, British and German, stopped shooting, and

in two languages - English and German, you could hear the carol, Silent Night, Heilige Nacht, being sung.

In our politically correct days now, you'd be in almost as much trouble by singing a Carol in school, as facing the enemy in Bagdad.

Except, except, we know, as the light of God's love that shined from the face of the boy child Jesus, as that light penetrated the society thru his teaching, and his life, we know that love found a way to be seen and known.

We know people saw the light of love at work in Jesus and found themselves faced with the choice of how they would then choose to live. And we know, from the beginning, choosing the way of Christ, the light way of love, was no easy thing.

In John Jesus said it - "And this is the judgment - that the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light...."

In a strange way, in our day, the greatest enemy of the light of God's love in Christ, the greatest threat to people seeing the true light of Christ like love, may not be darkness, but too much light, light that causes a blindness of spirit.

In all the rush and crush, the hurry and worry that fills these days before Christmas, the glare and blare of our noisy, ad campaign inspired, sometimes nasty, Black Fridays, or the days before Christmas blizzard of buying ...

In all of this attention to the Holiday, the Holy Day's light of hope and peace and joy and love is dimmed, maybe even dimmed out.

Except - Except - where wise persons still choose to live in the true light, choose to act in loving ways, choose faith first and not worldly fame or fortune. Then, then, the light guides the way we live.

And... Mitch Albom has done it again. He has lifted up for all to see how love can choose, consider, find... ways to live that let God's light shine.

And bless Mitch Albom's soul, for he has shown, in his media savvy way, that the good and loving faithful things he does, are also being done day by day by day by faithful people who choose loving ways to live.

Some people picked up on Mitch Albom's loving act of putting a roof on the Trumbell Avenue Presbyterian Church - so it could continue to house a shelter and, yes, sorry to day, a Baptist Church. People from all over gave money and materials... They let the light of love shine. And - we Presbyterians were saved by a Jewish man. Which - as I remember the story - is not the first time.

But other people, inspired by Mitch's story, have found other equally loving ways of shining light, the true light, of faith and love into the world.

That's the challenge and call of Christmas, every year again, to choose loving ways to live, to give the holiday its holiness back.

Sure – take a day. Do the Mall. Don't bet on finding much love there. But Find a treasure or two to brighten a loved one's eyes and spirit. But, then, do much more. Yes, in the quiet someplace, write a check that will feed hungry people, or clothe them or house them – in the name of Christ.

Write a note to an aging friend – giving thanks for his or her life. Write to a teacher who helped you grow. If you gave a gift for Baldwin Center Christmas, thank you for that. Or to help this Church, your Church, keep its budget promises to the ministries and missions we support. Thank you for that.

And maybe send, too, a gift to USO - to help let our soldiers know you and we know what price we've asked others to pay for us.

The call for all this? Just choose a Christmas way to live...And as we choose loving ways to live into the best of the Christmas spirit, Pray the strength of faith to let such a way of living and loving to spill over well into the new year of the lord.

It's the message of Jesus' words in John, intended for us.. Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

Someone put the call of Christmas – the call to us to let the shining face of love we've seen in Jesus Christ light the days of life ahead us - someone put it this way..

Don't just celebrate Christmas - Keep Christmas.

Be willing to stoop down and consider the needs and the desires of little children; to remember the weakness and loneliness of people who are growing old; to stop asking how much your friends love you, and ask yourself whether or not you love them enough; to bear in mind the things that other people have to bear on their hearts; to own that probably the only good reason for your existence is not what you are going to get out of life, but what you are going to give to life; to close your book of complaints against the management of the universe, and look around you for a place where you can sow a few seeds of happiness – (Dale Nelson, Park Church GR) In other words....

Open your mind and heart and let love's light shine through you in this season, step outside the crazy costly holiday hurrah - and find ways, let God's love at work in you, lead you to choose ways, loving ways to live.

Let your own prayer be, in the rest of this season, O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell, O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord, Emmanuel. May we love our way through Christmas this year.

Amen.

David W. Robertson, Co-Pastor