

Sermon Series: ~~Im~~Possible - "Love Made Possible"

Matthew 1:18-25

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Rev. Zachary Hopple

Christ UMC, Lansdale, PA

Worship Question: In our scripture God is called Emmanuel, which means "God is with us." When have you experienced God with you?

Today is December 21. In this hemisphere this is the day we have the least amount of daylight. So it is seen as the shortest day and tonight is known as the longest night of the year. It is a time that can often feel dark, cold, and lonely. It is around this time that we here at Christ UMC hold our Blue Christmas service, which was just last week. During that service we acknowledge the darkness that is often present for many during this holiday season - where the peace, hope, joy, and love that is supposed to be present during Advent and Christmas sometimes seems impossible to grasp for those dealing with loss, heartache, pain, and suffering. But even so - even in the midst of both good times and not so good times - still we worship.

During Advent we light another candle on our wreath - signaling the coming of the Light of God, the Light of the World, Jesus Christ - Emmanuel - God with us. This 4th week of Advent is the week of love, a week where we celebrate Jesus Christ the love of God made manifest in this world.

Did you ever experience a time where love felt impossible? Where you felt like the entire world was standing in the way of your love? When Jen and I were dating, it snowed our first Christmas. I was determined to be with Jen on Christmas and so I planned on leaving my home after our family lunch to be with her. However, my now mother-in-law had all but forbidden the visit. I was not too happy that I was not allowed to make the drive to see the love of my life. I mean, it was only a foot of snow and 100 miles. What could have gone wrong? But in the moment I was upset. I felt that everything was standing between me and what I wanted to do. Standing between me and the person I loved, who I already knew I was going to marry. Needless to say I waited until the next morning to drive up to see Jen. And my mother-in-law was right: it was better that I wasn't driving in the snow. (Thank you mom.) But I still give her a hard time about it, and she still gives me a hard time about it more than 20 years later.

But sometimes situations happen in life that make things difficult which makes love seem impossible. Or maybe things at this time of year just seem a little bit more chaotic and hectic and love might not seem impossible, but it's not as simple as you might think it should be. We might be anxious about getting people the right presents. Or nervous about being with relatives we have not seen in a year. Or maybe wondering about the road conditions for our time of travel. Sure, the Advent season is one of peace, hope, joy and love, but it is not always so simple.

Our scripture today was about something that should have been simple, but was anything but. We often look at the Christmas story from the point of view of Mary, and rightfully so. And we consider how the angels spoke to the shepherds to announce the birth of the baby Jesus. We talk about the wise men who traveled afar. And yes, we often mention Joseph, but we don't always dive into his part of the story.

Honestly, and sadly, we don't know much about Joseph. Most of what we know about him we get from these few verses, a little bit from Luke, and a little bit inferred about him

from later on in Jesus' ministry. We know he was from Nazareth, which we get from Luke 2. We know he was from the line of David which we see in the genealogy in the beginning of this chapter. We know he's a carpenter because in Matthew 13 people describe Jesus as the son of a carpenter. We know that Joseph and Mary had other kids, at least 4 boys and some daughters, again from Matthew 13. And the last we see of Joseph is in Luke 2 when Jesus is 12 and gets left behind at the temple. Other than that, our scripture today tells us that Joseph was a good man. He was righteous - he wanted to do what was right. Not just right in the eyes of society, but what was morally and ethically the right thing to do.

Because we have this situation where he was engaged to Mary and they were at a point where there was no denying that she was going to have a child. There were no paternity tests at that time to prove that the baby was going to be the son of God. No daytime talk shows to help them figure it all out. And this kind of thing never happened before. And so Joseph was put in a bit of a bind.

According to social and religious customs of the time he could have disgraced her publicly and made a huge spectacle of Mary in order to preserve his own image and reputation. They were engaged and for all intents and purposes it was almost as if they were already married. They just didn't seal the deal yet. It was expected that they were to be completely devoted to one another. (The same would be expected today.) And yet Joseph had reason to believe otherwise.

Something had gotten in the way of his love. But Joseph, being the man he was, wanted to simply divorce her quietly so that he and Mary would just go their separate ways. No fuss. They would just split and start their lives anew. But that is not how the story was meant to be.

God was doing something impossible. God sent an angel to Joseph in a dream to tell him what was going on. And despite the fact that our pageant the other week made a very strong case for the fact that Zachary would have been a very good name to give the baby, Joseph named him Jesus as the angel instructed. God's love was shown to us in an impossible way. God's love came here as Jesus the Christ.

The Creator God sent Jesus into this world to make perfect love possible and it was done through a miracle. It was agape love, an all encompassing sacrificial love. Love for all humankind. It was done in a way to fulfill the prophecy from Isaiah 7:14 where it says, "'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means 'God is with us.'" When this promise was made by the prophet Isaiah, it would have been impossible to imagine that this child would actually be God-in-the-flesh. The promised child in Isaiah was depicted as a sign from God to the current king of Judah (Ahaz) when he was making military and political choices. The idea that God could be present in human form was impossible. And because God loves not just the people of Israel but all people, a love of this depth became possible in the person of Jesus. Jesus took Isaiah's prophecy to the next level.

This is what the Advent/Christmas season is all about. God doesn't just give us a promise or a sign about something, God actually shows up in our lives. Sometimes it is very obvious when God shows up - a miraculous intervention. Sometimes not so much. Sometimes God showing up in our lives might seem like a closed door or something going wrong that we never anticipated. I know I have faced many of those situations. I know my life was never a straight line trajectory. And while I know God never causes bad things to happen to us, I know God can use negative things in our lives for growth and positive outcomes. Maybe not right away, but we get there if we allow it.

Looking back over my own life, if I look at those places in my life where I feel were my biggest failures or shortcomings, if I had made one choice differently I am pretty sure I would not be standing here as a pastor today. My life would be completely different and I don't think it would have been for the better.

God does amazing things all the time. Sometimes we see it. Sometimes we don't. And sometimes we only see it years later after it happens. But it is always because God loves us.

In our scripture we see love being made possible in a few different ways. The first is the obvious way through Jesus himself, both fully man and fully divine coming to this world through impossible circumstances. To save this world from sin, death, and an eternal separation from God. All because God loves us enough to do that for us.

The second way is through the assurance God provided to Joseph (and also to Mary, in Luke 2) through the angel's message of comfort. This happened in the midst of Joseph's anxiety and decision to "dismiss" Mary. Now we may not always get messages from angelic beings, but God provides assurance and comfort to us in times of anxiety and difficult decision making too.

For me, my call into ministry was not an easy one. I needed to go back to school to finish my bachelor's degree and there are a whole host of stories associated with that and how God provided for me with that decision and situation. But then after that, in order to be ordained I needed to go for my masters degree. And through the support of my church and some friends who through their love and generosity I was able to pay my way through seminary without taking out another loan on top of my loans from my failed attempts at college and then going back to college. I thought it would be an impossible journey for me to become ordained, but because of the love and support of quite a few people in my life I got there. It took me 15 years - but I got there. And sometimes those kind acts or those generous acts might not seem like much to the ones who offer them, but it means the world to the person receiving them. Sometimes you don't realize how much those actions mean until much later.

The same can be said about God. Sometimes we don't realize the comfort and assurance that comes with an expression of God's love until long after the fact. It can take practice to start noticing where God's love is showing up day to day. Because we may not always see it at first.

But there's one more thing that makes this impossible love in our scripture today possible, and that was what Joseph and Mary did. They responded. God asked them to do something and they said yes. God asked Mary to play a huge role in carrying the Son of God and she said yes. Luke 1 tells us that Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Our scripture doesn't tell us that Joseph actually said anything, but he took Mary as his wife and named the child Jesus, just as the angel instructed.

And because of the willingness of these two people impossible love was made possible in this world. They were willing to follow God's plan for them even if it seemed impossible. Even if it meant that practically the whole world would be against them. And they may not have realized the impact their decisions would have on themselves and this world. But what they did helped change this world forever.

Where have you seen or experienced God's love for you over the course of your life? Where have you seen God working in your life and you realized that God's love was there? Again, sometimes it takes looking back over the course of a number of years or even a lifetime to see God's loving plans laid out for you. During this Advent season, how does love

sometimes seem impossible? How do things seem hard, or how does the world seem to be getting in the way? What can you do to look for God's presence during these hard times?

I have been really enjoying the devotionals this Advent season. We have been using the daily scriptures that go along with this sermon series and some of our members wrote the devotional to go along with each one. There were a couple no one chose and so I filled in. One that no one chose was from Psalm 80 from this past Tuesday and we were to talk about joy, but the Psalm was nothing joyful at all. But the one thing that I noticed was that when things were not going well for the psalmist, the psalmist didn't turn away from God but instead turned to God even more. They cried out to God and longed for God even more.

The same can be said about any aspect of life. Whenever we feel lost or where love seems impossible, we need to turn more to God. We need to lean into God even more, looking even harder for God's love. Because it is there it never goes away. We just may not see it right away. But God does send us love each and every day.

We have the assurances. It may not be an angelic messenger, but there are times where we are reminded that we are on the right path. There are people that encourage us. There are situations that remind us that God is there. There are opportunities that express God's love for us in ways we never thought possible or were at the exact times that we needed it.

But we also have to remember that sometimes God's love plays out through us and we have to be willing to agree to be used by God to spread God's love to others. We need to remember to be thankful for God's love. We need to remember to be thankful that Jesus came here to spread God's love to this whole world and will come again. We need to be thankful for the love of others in our lives. For our friends and our family and our church family. Even those in our community that we don't know too well. For example, our nativity set blew down in the wind on Friday and when one of our church members arrived to set it back up Saturday morning one of our neighbors was already working on it. And so we need to be thankful for the places where we can see God's love in action around us and be God's love in action.

We are more than a sign of God's love made possible in this world. We are the reality of God's love made possible in this world. From our worship here on Sunday mornings, to the different activities throughout the week, to the different ministry opportunities we host and we support. We are to be God's love in this world. It can be as simple as how we treat the person we pass in the grocery store, to playing a part in a miracle in someone's life. Whatever it is, God's love is made possible in this world through the saving power of Jesus Christ, through the actions of the Holy Spirit, and through the work of the believers who seek to live out their faith to the glory of God.

There's a quote by John Wesley from his sermon about Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and he says, "Love cannot be hid any more than light; and least of all when it shines forth in action, when ye exercise yourselves in the labour of love, in beneficence of every kind. As well, many men think to hide a city as to hide a Christian." In other words, our love in action should be so powerful that it would be easier to hide a city than it would be to hide a Christian who acts in God's love. Can that be said about you this Christmas season?

I challenge you to think of ways to share God's love with others for the rest of this year and into next. Think of something little you can do to express love for someone else. But also look for ways you can accept God's love in your life and then share it with others. Because Jesus poured out his love on you, the least we can do is let it spill out into the lives of those around us.