

## GOD DOESN'T WANT YOU TO EAT STALE BAGELS

Today's sermon is a love story. A love story from God.

God wants you to experience God's love, and God's joy, in your life. God gave us his only son, Jesus Christ, whom God loved, to show us just how very much God loves us.

God's love is there for us even in the most difficult times and under the harshest circumstances of our own lives. Jesus' death on the cross means we are free to experience God's love for us without being bound by rules, duties or obligations to God.

Even in the hardest times in your own life – God's love is there for you. As Christians, we can be there for others to share God's love during difficult times.

Even in the harshest place on Earth, and the most difficult times in our own lives, the love and support of others can help you cope with difficult issues in your own life.

[PAUSE FOR 5]

Raise your hand if you've ever heard of the 2005 documentary "March of the Penguins?" The documentary, narrated by actor Morgan Freeman, portrays the life cycle of emperor penguins living in Antarctica – the harshest places on Earth. Even in the worst weather, and the coldest times, the penguins survive.

Even in in the hardest times in our own lives, or under the harshest conditions, God's love is there for us.

Antarctica is the only continent on Earth with no permanent human habitation. In fact, nothing else survives there other than Emperor penguins. NASA scientists have found that climate change has actually caused *more* ice to form in some parts of Antarctica. They say this is happening because of new climate patterns caused by climate change. The normal temperature in Antarctica ranges from 14 degrees to – 22 degrees Fahrenheit. Polar vortex winds have lowered temperatures in the Antarctic and have been building in strength in recent decades. Wind speeds often exceed 100 miles per hour in the winter.

Yet, as Morgan Freeman states in the documentary, even in the harshest places on earth, love finds a way. Penguins love, mate, give birth and raise their young by supporting each other. By sharing resources. By huddling together in a large pack to protect against the Antarctic winds and rotating which penguin is on the outside of the pack and which is on the inside. They protect each other. They share their warmth. Isn't that what God wants of us? To love our neighbor as ourselves? To remind each other that even in the coldest and most difficult times of our lives – we are not alone. God's love is there for us. We can be there for each other.

Morgan Freeman says, “even in the harshest place on Earth, love finds a way.” Even in the harshest time of your life – God’s love finds a way. The support of others who have experienced similar circumstances or are simply willing to share their warmth with you can help you cope

I believe God is always there for us -- no matter what we do, or don’t do. No matter what we say or don’t say. No matter what rules we follow or don’t follow.

We cannot escape God’s love even if we don’t believe in God. God’s love is always surrounding us. Above us, below us, around us, and inside of us.

Christ’s birth, ministry and death is, after all, a love story from God. A gift from God.

And what is love story without joy?

I offer to you the following thought today -- God wants you to experience God’s love by feeling God’s joy. Joy in your own life from being a Christian.

Joy does not come from being dutiful or following rules. Joy comes from feeling God’s love for you, no matter what you are experiencing. God doesn’t promise it will be easy but God does promise that you will never be alone.

[PAUSE FOR 5]

Speaking of not being alone, many of you know that Pat Irwin and I have both begun participating, together, in a Commissioned Lay Pastor or “CLP” program this past fall. After two full years of online classes, fall, spring and summer each year, we are both hoping to become lay pastors. Pat and I started our program together this past September. We are the only church members from our Presbytery of 59 churches participating in this program. Our Presbytery does not offer this program so we participate through Wabash Presbytery, located in northern Indiana.

It is a joy to have the support of another person in the exact same situation when you are facing a new challenge like going back to school for the first time in thirty years.

Why did we begin this program? I can’t speak for Pat, but I can tell you that I felt God’s love in my heart. God telling me, “do something more. Share God’s love with others.”

Pat and I take classes online only. The classes are offered through Columbia Seminary, in the State of Georgia. We take no tests. We write no papers. Instead, for each six-week class, we watch videos online then comment on the videos through an online bulletin board.

Once each class is complete, we have a 6 hour in person meeting in northern Indiana on a Saturday with our fellow students who have just completed the same class. Since our program is

led by Wabash Presbytery, located in the Ft. Wayne area, we travel north for all of our in person meetings.

When we complete a class, and turn in all our discussion responses, we get an online badge of completion. I told my children it's like earning a sticker.

[PAUSE FOR LAUGHS]

I am very proud of my first sticker. I not only printed it out -- I saved it. In multiple places. Earning a sticker gives me great joy. In my real life, I am a lawyer, so I like to have proof of someone's statements. So, here is my proof which I now offer into evidence, without objection, as Petitioner's Exhibit 1. (hold up sheet)

[PAUSE FOR LAUGHS]

For me, one of the things that brings me joy about participating in the CLP program—other than the stickers—is the chance to learn more about the Bible. Pat and I finished our first class on the Old Testament, at the end of October. We start our next class, the New Testament, in mid-January.

[PAUSE FOR 5]

One thing I learned in last fall's Old Testament program that was a surprise to me, is how many different times the same story might be told in different sections of the Old Testament in different ways. This doesn't mean one way is right way and one way is wrong way. It just means the stories were written, or edited, for different audiences. The same story told in a different way, in two places, is called a "doublet." There are actually "triplets" and "quadruplets" in the Old Testament.

The same applies to the New Testament. The gospels in the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, written by different authors, tell the same story, the story of Jesus' birth, ministry and death. But, each gospel emphasizes different themes in the story of life of Jesus. Each story tells the love of God for us in sending us the gift of Jesus Christ.

Each of these Gospels is a love story. A story to share the joy of Christ's birth, life and death with others.

[PAUSE FOR 5]

You can also find the joy of God's love in the Old Testament.

Our first reading today, from I Chronicles 16, is about a joyous moment in the life of King David. It parallels the same story told in 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel. It is a "doublet" or the same story told

in two different ways. But, the stories are different. Each story has a different emphasis and using a different historical context.

Some scholars believe the story of King David in I Chronicles was written **after** 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel. This allowed the author of I Chronicles to draw on the pre-existing story of David told in 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel and tried to make it better by putting David in a more positive light.

For example, in I Chronicles, David's rise to becoming King of Israel is shown as part of God's plan and not the result of political maneuvers, power struggles, or intrigue at King Saul's Court as it is told in 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel.

In addition, in I Chronicles, David's kingship was based on a long-standing support of the people and not from a power vacuum after King Saul's death as it is in 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel.

But, what is the reason for the joy in our 1<sup>st</sup> scripture passage? Why is King David joyous? It has to do with the recovery of the Ark of the Covenant from outside of Israel.

Again, the two version are different as far as the timing of the events.

In 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel, David conquers the Philistines then recovers the Ark. In I Chronicles the Ark comes first, then the battle with the Philistines. For scholars, which story was accurate in time doesn't matter. What does matter is what the authors, and editors, of the doublets chose to emphasize.

The joy in our passage from I Chronicles is David's joy, and the people's joy at recovering the Ark of the Covenant as stated in a public ceremony. David, as David always does, dances, with joy, in celebrating the recovery of the Ark.

[PAUSE FOR 5]

But, what of the Ark? Why was the recovery of the Ark so important?

For the author of I Chronicle, the story has religious implications. The Ark, containing the stone tablets of the 10 Commandments, isn't simply moving to a new location, but returning to the land of Israel. David is reclaiming the Ark's central position on the spiritual life of its people.

In I Chronicles 13:3, David publicly comments that he is bringing the Ark back to Israel is important. He asks the entire population if he should do so before acting. He reminds them, quote, "because we didn't look for it in Saul's days. The whole assembly agreed to do so, because all the people thought it was the right thing to do." End quote. In other words, the entire population is dancing with joy because they are turning back to God. The recovery of the Ark is a symbol of the kingdom's return to God. It is a joyous occasion.

David celebrates with joy. Quote, “Let the heavens celebrate! Let the earth rejoice! Give thanks to the Lord because he is good. Because his faith love endures forever.”

Once the Ark arrives in David’s city, I Chronicles 16:3, King David blesses the legion of people who had helped in the transport of the Ark by given each Israelite who had helping in the transport of the Ark gifts: Quote: “A loaf of bread, a piece of meat and a raisin cake.” The raisin cake sounds suspiciously like fruit cake, a gift I would not want, but let’s assume the raisin cake was a much more welcome gift.

While there are raisin cakes in our first scripture reading, there are no bagels. So, why did I mention stale bagels in the title of this sermon? Here is my story.

[PAUSE FOR 5]

As many of you know, I now live alone. After my husband, Ken Duggins, passed away, in 2020, I had to adjust my eating habits as well as my grocery shopping habits. I no longer had someone who could or would eat leftovers. I was stuck as the only consumer in my house since people food is not good for my greyhound dogs, though they adore bagels. There was a movement, among my children, to name our newest greyhound Bagel instead of Buddy since he would grab a bagel out from under your hand on the kitchen counter. My late husband insisted “Bagel” was a silly name for a dog so he became “Buddy.” As a side note, he still answers to “Bagel” which may or may not be my fault.

[PAUSE FOR 5]

Going back to the stale bagels. After my husband died, I was the only one left to eat bagels. I normally eat one half a bagel per day each morning for breakfast topped by two pieces of Swiss cheese. There are six in each package. If I eat one-half a bagel per day, I have 12 days of bagels. I buy one package during my once per week run to the grocery store. This leaves me with at least two stale bagels every week at the end of seven days.

I know some of you will say, “just freeze the bagels and thaw them out when you need them.” I’ve tried it. They taste like cardboard. Eating a cardboard bagel does not bring me joy.

[PAUSE FOR 5]

In the past, despite having bought brand-new fresh bagels, I would force myself to eat the old, stale bagels before opening the new package of bagels.

Each week the number of stale bagels I had to consume before I could open the “fresh” bagels grew higher.

Eventually I had only stale bagels to eat – the old and new packages were both stale. It was a sad moment for me when I realized this.

[PAUSE FOR FIVE]

One day, I thought to myself, “this is ridiculous. **God doesn’t want you to eat stale bagels.** God wants you to feel happiness and joy. Eat the new bagels first.”

This began a great battle in my brain. One side said, “don’t waste the old, stale bagels. God doesn’t want you to waste food” while the other side said, “be happy. Eat fresh bagels and get rid of the stale ones.”

It struck me that my battle, about consuming stale bagels first, is similar to how people view Christianity and being a Christian. **It’s all about following the rules.** Following your duty and obligations. It’s not about the joy of eating a fresh bagel.

[PAUSE FOR 5]

But, does God want us to feel that being a Christian is only duty and sacrifice and not feeling joy?

God tells us God feels joy in Mark 1:11. When Jesus is being baptized, Jesus saw the heavens split open and heard God’s voice say, “You are my son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness.” So, we know God experiences love. God experiences joy. Being joyful is not contrary to God’s plan for us as Christians.

What does Jesus say about being a Christian? “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Here is the full passage from Matthew 11:29-30.

“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Does that passage bring comfort to anyone else other than me? In Jesus’ death, Jesus’ sacrifice cleansed us of all our sins, then Jesus’ sacrifice saved us all. Our sins are forgiven. We don’t need to follow all of the rules, duties and obligations to be saved – just believe in Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection. “Ask and it shall be given to you.”

The story of Jesus’ birth, life and death, was a love story. For all of us. For Christians, love finds a way.

[PAUSE FOR 5]

Right now, in your own life, you may be in the harshest place or situation you have ever faced. Your health may be failing. Your family may be divided or missing. You may not have money to pay your bills. Someone in your family may be facing a battle with addiction.

Some of you may not be able to feel joy as a Christian right now. Life may be consumed by worry and anxiety. The gospel of Matthew addresses the worries of Christians. Nowhere in the Old or New Testament does it say, “those who believe in God will live perfect lives and not worry” Instead, the Bible says God is with you in your worries. God’s love never leaves you. You are never alone.

I don’t know if it helps, but keep in mind that many people of faith go through times of questioning when the foundation cracks and we brace ourselves, waiting to see if the whole structure will crumble. Doubt finds each of us at different times and in different ways.

In the harshest times, we don’t want someone else’s answers and we don’t need someone’s opinion because more opinions just create more anxiety. What we really need to know is that we’re not alone. God does not want us to worry about our troubles.

[PAUSE FOR 5]

In our second reading today, from Matthew 6, it states, Quote, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear... Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? But seek first his kingdom and righteousness and all these things will be given to you.”

Ask and you shall receive. Knock and the doors will be opened to you. The doors open your path to feeling God’s love inside of you.

As I mentioned earlier, today’s sermon is a love story. A love story from God.

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God’s love is there for us even in the most difficult times and under the harshest circumstances of our own lives. Jesus’ death on the cross means we are free to experience God’s love for us without being bound by rules, duties or obligations to God.

Even in the hardest times in your own life – God’s love is there for you. As Christians, we can be there for others to share God’s love during difficult times.

Just like the penguins protect each other, so we, too, can share our warmth with each other.

God felt joy in Jesus.

David felt joy when he recovered the ark and danced before God.

God wants us to feel God's love, and joy, in community with others.

[PAUSE FOR FIVE]

Here's the question I would like to ask you today....

[PAUSE FOR FIVE]

Do you believe you can be a Christian even if you don't eat stale bagels?

[PAUSE FOR FIVE]

In the harshest season of your life, may the love of God fill your heart. Because after all, Jesus's birth, life and death, is, in the end, a love story for all ages. And what is a love story without joy? May you feel the love and warmth from the support of others when you cannot face your worries alone. May God's love enter into your heart today, and always.

AMEN.