

The Light of Love

During the 4 weeks of Advent, we have been focusing on the 4 candles of the Advent wreath: the candle of hope, the candle of peace, the candle of joy... now today, the 4th candle, the candle of love. As we think about this candle, we realize that 2 important things. First of all we realize that it is God who lights this candle of love in our lives.

Now, some years at Christmas, the light of God's love burns strongly in our hearts, and other years, the flame flickers, and threatens to go out. So much in life can make it hard to keep the light aglow: the problems & struggles we face; sickness or chronic pain; grief: the aching loss when a friend or family member dies; worries about the future; tensions at home or at school or at work; someone's words or actions that tear us apart... It's hard to keep the light of God's love aglow.

That was the situation for God's people living in exile in Babylon—the people who first heard the prophetic words of Ezekiel which Darcy read this morning. In the year, 597 BC the vicious armies of Babylon had overrun the small country of Judah and its capital city, Jerusalem. They took the royal family & thousands of the leading citizens as prisoners of war, slave-laborers, back to Babylon. Ten years later, the armies returned, once again plundering the city and this time destroying the holy temple. The people were devastated. Where was God when they needed him?

Then, God spoke through his prophet, Ezekiel. God promised to be the shepherd for his people. He would bring them back home to Israel; he would care for them, strengthen them, help them and protect them. 40 years after the destruction of the temple, God kept his promise. God made it possible for the people to return to Israel and to rebuild the temple.

But there was a deeper promise here—a promise that someday a new king would be born, a descendant of King David. This king would be God’s own Son. He would be called Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” (Isaiah 7:14) And this new king would be the good shepherd; he would “feed his flock like a shepherd and gather the lambs in his arms.” (Isaiah 40:11).

550 years later, the people of Israel once again lived in hopelessness and despair. Their country was now ruled by the cruel power of Rome. Again, the people asked, “Where was God when they so desperately needed him?” But God fulfilled his promise. One day, the angel Gabriel appeared to a young woman, a virgin named Mary, who was engaged to Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel told Mary that she would conceive by the power of Holy Spirit. We read Gabriel’s words in Luke 1:35:

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you;
therefore the child to be born will be called holy,
the Son of God.”

Sure enough, we continue reading in Luke: “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” (Luke 2: 1-7)

God's love came into the world in a new and powerful way that first Christmas night when Jesus was born. God's own Son, Emmanuel, "God With Us." God lit the candle of love for our world that Christmas night.

And this year at Christmas, once again God lights the candle of love in our lives. The words of the prophet Ezekiel are meant for each one of us, personally, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who promised, "I am the good shepherd." (John 10:11) Reflect on Ezekiel's words and how God is active in your life: "For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for you, my sheep, and will seek you out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when some of his sheep have been scattered abroad, so will I seek you out, my sheep, and I will rescue you from all the places where you have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring you out from the peoples, and gather you from the countries, and will bring you into your own land; and I will feed you on the mountains of Israel, by the fountains, and in all the inhabited place of the country. I will feed you with good pasture, and upon the mountain heights of Israel shall be your pasture; there you shall lie down in good grazing land, and on fat pasture you shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd for you, my sheep, and I will make you lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek you when you are lost, and I will bring you back when you stray, and I will bind you up when you are crippled, and I will strengthen you when you are weak, and when you are strong I will watch over you, and feed you in justice." (Ezekiel 34: 11-16, personalized)

There's a recent story about the length that God will go to care for us, to be our shepherd, to light the candle of love in our lives. It's the story of Kumiko, a young, newly-married Japanese woman. The company her husband worked for had a factory in a small Wisconsin town, and he

was promoted to a position there, which meant they needed to move far from their home & family to settle in Wisconsin. Actually, the young woman didn't mind. She had read once that Christians were not afraid to die. She didn't know any Christians in Japan, but she had vowed that if she ever had the chance to talk to a Christian, she would ask why this was so. She was terrified of dying and wanted an answer.

Kumiko didn't realize how interested God was in answering her question. Shortly after she & her husband settled in, a missionary couple from Japan retired and moved to the same little Wisconsin town. Upon learning that there were six Japanese families living in the area, the missionaries decided to start an outreach ministry at the local church.

On the first Sunday morning of the ministry, the missionary asked the class a question that stunned Kumiko, "Many of us live with fear. Are any of you afraid?" There was a nervous silence. After a moment, the missionary turned to Kumiko, unaware of her need. "How about you, Kumiko, what are you afraid of?"

Two months later, Kumiko gave her life to Jesus. Her husband soon followed. Together they named their new child, Grace, after the church where God had gone to such great lengths to answer her questions about fear and death.

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How far will God go to be your shepherd, to light the candle of love in your life? He brought a young Japanese wife and a retired missionary more than 10,000 miles so that a seeking heart might find Him. God will go even farther, from the heights of heaven, to a stable in Bethlehem, to bring his love to you.

And so we light the candle of love, praying: “God, hold us in your love this Christmas.”

That prayer is expressed in our Advent video this morning. Let’s watch it now.

[Show: “Love” <https://skitguys.com/videos/item/advent-worship-collection>]

The Advent candle of love—the first thing we need to know about it, is that God lights this candle of love in our lives.

Then, there’s a second thing: we can shine the light of God’s love into others’ lives. There are so many people we know, whose light seems so small and fragile right now. Christmas gives us a special opportunity to share God’s love. We can keep God’s love aglow through a caring word, a simple prayer, a thank you, a little gift, a listening ear, an encouraging card, a small kindness... Sometimes, we get overwhelmed by all the needs around us. Focus on one... Maybe a kid, a youth, a young adult, a parent, a middle-aged adult, a grandparent, a senior citizen... one person to whom God is leading you, to share His light with them, this Christmas.

So light the candle of love... and the candle of hope, the candle of peace, the candle of joy. And sing Noel, Good News, born is the king, the Christ child, the gift of God’s love. Amen.

Christmas carol: “The First Noel”