

CHRISTMAS MESSAGES FROM AREA PASTORS

He First Loved You

The early 4th century historian Jerome writes about the aged Apostle John in His commentary on Galatians. Jerome explains how John, in his old age, would be carried into the church in Ephesus, and as he would find enough strength to stand or much of the time just sit up to speak. He would say just one phrase, “Little children love one another.” It seemed that the one most important fact that John felt needed to be said was that one statement. But the story continues, in one of the very last days of John’s life, they again began to carry him into the church, and as he always did, John spoke the same phrase. Well one of his students asked a question, he said “Master, why do you always say the same thing?” John’s answer was this, “Because it is the highest of the Lord’s commands. If this is done, you are on the right course. If you have not done this, you have failed.”

This is so true, and we all need to be reminded of this truth within our own lives. With Christmas taking place within the next few days, now more than ever it is important for us to be reminded of the true meaning behind this important and precious day. You see it’s not just about gifts, good food and spending time with family. Though all these things are good and enjoyable. But if you strip back all these things, the heart of Christmas is something much deeper. You see, Christmas is a reminder that God loves each and every one of us. Jesus, God’s one and only Son, came into this world so that one day, He could redeem and save us all from sin and death. But why was He willing to do this? Well, it’s because He loves you. So, I challenge us all this Christmas to remember the true meaning behind this joyful day and make the choice to respond to the love of Christ by taking John’s advice and “love one another.” For as it says in John 13:35, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

*Pastor Quentin Byers
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A Christmas reminder for living a life of love

Our little communities, state, country, and indeed the world is without question heading into a “different” kind of Christmas. The troubled economy, chaotic politics, the COVID-19 pandemic... all sorts of turmoil is truly making these seem like uncertain times.

Yet, as followers of Christ we can hold on to the assurances that God gives us through Jesus, and have confidence that no matter what life brings, God is the same today as He was yesterday and will be tomorrow

The prophet Isaiah spoke to this in a prophetic vision of a dying stump being regenerated: “Out of the stump of David’s family will grow a shoot — yes, a new branch bearing fruit from the old root. And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on him — the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord” (Isaiah 11:1-2, NLT).

This Christmas may seem “different,” yet it might turn out to be the most “real” Christmas we experience as children of God – where disrupted plans and the “stumps” of hopes provide the perfect place for God’s power to shine... for even in dark times, God is at work for regeneration and fresh starts.

The central mission for the Body of Christ in the world today is to be and to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, and this becomes even more essential in times such as these. Loving God by loving others is the greatest task, blessing, and responsibility God has given us. No matter who we are or where we come from, the follower of Jesus Christ is uniquely situated to be the voice of hope, peace, joy, love and reason in these uncertain times. We can truly be a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. We all would do well in praying for God to show us the way together.

Christmas is an excellent time to remember that “... God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so

Glory to God on high

Glory to God on high! When the sky erupted in song one dark night long ago, I wonder if that choir of angels was fully aware of what God was getting mixed up in. The Son of God was putting on flesh and bone to become one with creatures who had been made in God’s own likeness . . . a likeness they had long ago tarnished, almost forgetting who had made them. Now they were about to make a bumpy path for that newborn child to traverse. He’d grow up attending to the endless needs of the hungry and the sick. He’d hang out with the wrong crowd and forgive the unforgivable . . . and get killed for it (temporarily). But on the night of his birth, there were plenty of reasons to sing.

The familiar lessons and carols associated with Christmas tell the story well. Reread Luke 2. Sing “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” or “Joy to the World” and pay closer attention to the lyrics. The whole story doesn’t need to be retold on these pages. But there’s one detail not to be missed: The story of this birth is for you. Jesus was born for you, and he’s born in you when you turn to him in faith.

Whether you’re celebrating the birth of a child into your own household, or grieving the death of a parent or spouse, or suffering from pandemic fatigue, or fearing what might lie ahead, you can look to God with hope and confidence because God is present with you always. Whether times are joyful or tragic, God has promised to never leave us or forsake us, or let sin stand in the way of God’s unconditional love for us all. This day, this season, may the love of Christ be born anew in you.

And if the prophet Zephaniah has it right, even God will celebrate that new you by joining in on the singing. Zephaniah 3:17 (modified slightly) puts it this way: “The Lord your God is in your midst . . . he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you [even you; especially you] with loud singing.” Gloria!

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A Lutheran & Episcopal partnership*

that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16, NRSV), and “... God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8, NIV).

The familiar words of the popular Christmas carol, “O Holy Night” provides us with a profound truth in the final verse: “Truly He taught us to love one another; His law is love and His gospel is peace.” If we want to know how to love one another, to be a part of what can make a profoundly positive difference, we just need to look at the love that sent Jesus to earth to live a life of love and pay the price for all of our sins.

It’s all about love. This isn’t a love of fancy words and impossible tasks. This is a love that says, “I am willing to love you no matter what.”

As we celebrate the miracle of this special season, may our hearts be filled with hope, peace, joy, and especially love. May these blessings linger in our homes and stay with us throughout the year and empower us to show the world the Way the Truth and the Life of Jesus Christ.

*Jeff Clabaugh
Minister
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Christmas: A time to share and care

As I was preparing my Christmas message, I got an email from one of our Religious Education teachers of the 5th and 6th grade. The previous week’s Catechism Lesson was titled “Christmas: The Season of Peace.” She asked the kids of her class to show their understanding of the meaning of peace and why it is important at Christmas. The students were asked to write a prayer for peace and then shared them with all of the class. I found the prayers they wrote were very profound for this season of Christmas and wanted to share their messages with you for this Christmas 2020. I begin my Christmas Message with their prayer of Peace.

Dear God, Please make peace and happiness in the world! -Addie

God, please bring peace and joy to the world and to everyone in the world. -Isabel

PEACE- Let there be peace and joy throughout the world, and hopefulness in our community. -Maya.

Dear God, Give us peace in our community and all around the world. -Keato

Peace be to all in need, for those serving our nation, and for the ones that serve us daily. Lord, please bless all of these with peace and joy. -Andrew

May the lord bring peace to the world. Save us from sin and bring peace to me. Bring peace to those who need it and to all mankind. Amen. -Hannah

Lord, give us peace so we may follow you to our faith. Let us spread peace to the world and keep safety, love, joy and peace in our lives. Amen. -Claire

The child of Bethlehem was born to bring us all closer to the Father Almighty. Through His nativity, God in his magnanimity shares Himself with us. And what was the miracle? God became a little babe bringing peace, joy, serenity and happiness to a suffering humanity.

Mary, in spite of the fact she was with child, goes out of her way to help and be a source of joy for Elizabeth in her need, and similarly, God calls us, too. In spite of this peculiar situation that we are facing now with COVID-19 causing hardship, anxiety and fear, as He reached to the downtrodden ones of society, we need to share ourselves with others. Just as the Father shared His own Son with us and dispelled our gloom, sin, shame, and suffering, so, too, we are called to dispel the gloom, suffering, and

Peace when there is no Peace

This December during our Sunday morning worship services we have been discussing what it means to have peace. How can we live in a place free from disturbance, turbulence and disruption? Is there a way to navigate on a sea of glass in a world of hurricanes?

Many years ago, so many years in fact that some assume this story is legend or mythical rather than historical, God choose an unassuming young lady named Mary to be the person through which he would enter into this world in the flesh as a person. A person with arms and fingers and eyelashes capable of experiencing all of the colds and viruses and fears common to humanity.

This entrance into the world by God came about by humble means in a barn full of animals on a dark night in a little backroad town called Bethlehem. Isn’t it funny how God does great things in small towns?

This child grew and became the man we call Jesus, the most famous name in all the world to this day. Jesus reversed the curse of hurt and distress in the lives of those he met by healing the blind, causing the cripple to walk again, removing diseases from outcast lepers, feeding the hungry and educating the wise.

These miracles vastly improved the lives of those he met, but most importantly, at the age of 33, he willingly laid down and allowed nails to be driven into his hands. He allowed nails to be driven into his feet, pinning him to a wooden cross where he bled and died. This is the primary reason that baby was born in Bethlehem so long ago. He was born to die in my place and your place.

All of the guilt that I have, and you have, for all of the wrong things we have ever done were poured out on his body on that day so that neither you nor I have to face any judgment (ever) for those wrong things. We really should have been the ones who were held responsible for our own wrongdoing, but Jesus said no, put it on me instead.

This is why it is so important to see the baby in the manger for who he really is. This was the only way for us to be saved from the desperate situation we are in. God had to come and do it for us. Just an ordinary human being couldn’t fix it because we are all desperate and without peace. A human being who became a god couldn’t fix it because there is only one God. It had to be the one and only Lord God in the flesh, and this is exactly what happened in Palestine 2,000 years ago. He came to earth as a person to fix our peace deficient and in this way, God balanced the demands of justice but also demonstrated grace.

All of this may sound complex, maybe even baffling, if so, consider this simple truth...on that night in Bethlehem, Jesus, God in the flesh, was truly an innocent little baby wrapped in clothes and laid in a feeding trough. God, the creator and sustainer of life, was born as a man in a dirty, unsanitary place so that ultimately, he might die in the filth of sin for us all.

This year as you celebrate in whatever way you can or do, take time to mediate on that mind-blowing proposition. Understand and believe by faith that even in a world where peace is allusive, there is a way to know peace. Understanding this, believing this, embracing this is the way that you can have peace this Christmas and beyond.

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