

This month Dean and I have been watching a lot of Christmas movies. We have watched “The Polar Express,” “The Grinch,” “Home Alone” and “Christmas Vacation.” All these stories are about experiencing community and finding a place to belong. These movies remind us again of the gift of love we experience at Christmas by being together with those we love.

These movies are great, but the best love story of all time is the story of Christ’s birth. We retell the story of Christ’s birth every year to remind us what God has already done for us. God has already given us the best gift in Jesus Christ, and we are called to respond to this gift by loving God and others.

As we enter the second week of Advent today and celebrate God’s gift of love to us in Jesus Christ, may we be thankful that God loves us despite our imperfections. God knows us and even on our worst days, God loves anyway.

In the Bible there are many passages about the way God calls us to love. One of the most familiar passages is from 1 Corinthians 13:4-8:

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

This is the kind of love we all strive to embody as we love one another, but when we are honest, we must confess that so often we are unable to love fully in this way. Sometimes we are impatient, and unkind, envious, boastful, and proud. The truth is because of our human condition as sinners we are unable to perfectly love each other, **but the good news is God loves us perfectly.**

We know God loves us despite our imperfections, but there is something in us that makes us want to present our best selves to other people and to God. Also, our culture expects others to present their best selves to us as well. In a world where perfectly manicured pictures on Facebook are king, it is obvious that we try to present our perfect selves; on social media, in person, and even at church. We want to fit in and we want to belong. This is why we are sometimes afraid to share authentically with one another. We are afraid other people will not accept us just as we are.

In the book, “Almost Christmas” April Casperson shares that we all struggle with presenting our authentic selves and holding other people to unrealistic expectations.

Casperson says, “Too often we settle for an “almost love...a love that welcomes only the parts of people that are desirable, or palatable or easy to handle. An altogether love is cross-cultural and countercultural. It can seem irrational to love in this way or be loved in this way.”ⁱ

We see this countercultural nature of God’s love in the peaceable kingdom described by the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 11:6: “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” There are so many beautiful paintings depicting this Scripture and these images have always been so powerful to me.

The life that God invites us to live into is different than our cultural norms that teach us that we are almost good enough. The life that God invites us to live turns what we know and understand about power on its head as God uplifts the lowly and teaches us to live in peace.

Isaiah tells us a child will lead us into this new kind of life. We see this Scripture fulfilled in Matthew 1 which repeats Isaiah’s word from Isaiah 7:14: where a “virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Emmanuel.” Emmanuel which means God with us.

This is the retelling of the best love story ever told. That God gave of God’s very self so that we could be saved.

I think God got sick of talking through other people and God wanted to encounter us face to face. In the Old Testament God spoke to God’s people through choosing prophets to lead. These prophets led the people of God from death to life. They warned God’s people of things to come and called them to repentance. Yet we see the people of God kept turning away from God and going a different way. We could not save ourselves, even though God was helping us.

So, God sent us Jesus Christ, someone who knew our lives, who knew our suffering. Someone who turned cultural norms of his time upside down by spending time with sinners, and lepers, and tax collectors and by healing on the sabbath and calling people to partner with him who had no experience with evangelism.

This same God chose some of the least likely candidates to participate in God’s ministry in the world.

In our Scripture for today from Matthew 3 we see God chose John the Baptist to continue God’s counter-cultural ministry in the world. You see to most people John would not be the best first choice.

John was not used to being around people. In fact, he preferred being in the wilderness by himself. We hear John’s appearance described in Matthew 3: “he was arrayed in a ‘camel’s hair’ garment, secured by a leather belt, and his diet was locusts and wild honey” (Mt. 3:4). Commentary tells us his appearance may have been “reminiscent of the adornment of certain Old Testament prophets particularly Elijah.”ⁱⁱ

We see John is the final prophet to prophesy before Jesus’ arrival. Here we see John used Isaiah’s words: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (Matthew 3:3).

You see the people of God had been waiting for the Promised Messiah, and here John was telling them this is happening NOW! John told them this is not just another prophet like me who can preform baptisms. This is someone who can baptize with the power of the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matthew 3:11).

John the Baptist was willing to step out of his comfort zone to make this pronouncement because he desired to do the will of God and because he loved his cousin, Jesus.

John and Jesus had a special bond; you see they were second cousins after all. When Mary visited Elizabeth when they were both pregnant, Elizabeth’s baby leapt in her womb and she was “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Luke 1:40).

John was a very important person that helped us prepare for the coming of the Messiah. Again, we are reminded of the prophet Isaiah’s pronouncement of the peaceable kingdom and the countercultural love of God. Just as God chose David, Jesse’s youngest child, a lineage that Jesus shared through his father, Joseph, here we see God choosing John, an unlikely candidate to do the work of the Lord.

Last week we were encouraged by Jesus to be ready for second coming of the Son of God. Here at the beginning of Matthew it is John who is telling us to get ready for the first coming of the Son of God.

In both scriptures we are reminded again about the importance of preparation when it pertains to our faith. In her chapter on “Altogether Love” April Casperson encourages us to prepare to love God and others through our practice of personal holiness.

“Personal holiness” is a very Wesleyan concept. We live a life of personal holiness when we strive to love God and others in our personal lives. In other words, we are called to prepare to love God and others each day.

Preparation is important. It is how we prepare ourselves to respond to difficult situations and difficult people. It is how we train ourselves to respond in love. Preparing well in our faith will give us a strong foundation as we go out and face the world.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, and his friends prepared to face each day was by going through 22 questions each day. This was spiritual check-up of sorts for everyone. In answering these questions, it was impossible to not have something to celebrate and something to work on. The members of John Wesley’s Holy Club asked themselves these questions every day in their private devotions over 200 years ago. These questions are still powerful today!

Each question gets to the heart of the matter of our souls and asks us how we are actively loving God and actively loving our neighbors?

Some questions include:

- Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am better than I really am? In other words, am I a hypocrite?
- Did the Bible live in me today?
- Am I enjoying prayer?

Answering these questions remind us that the kind of love that God calls us to embody reaches into every aspect of our lives. God calls us to an “altogether love.”

Answering these questions prepares us to be more aware of how God is calling us to embody God’s love to others. This season of Advent I challenge you to see yourself as an active participant of God’s love story.

Just as John the Baptist took on his role for God and found himself doing some new things, we too are called to remain active in our faith as we wait once again to receive the Christ child.

I hope you will come out this coming Saturday as we go caroling and embody Christ love to all we encounter.

The good news for our lives today is that God loves us and proves that to us over and over again through the retelling of Christ’s birth. May we steep ourselves in the foundation of God’s love through personal holiness so that our first response may always be to respond in love. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ April Casperson et al. “Almost Christmas.” Abington: Nashville, TN. 2019. P. 63.

ⁱⁱ Leander Keck et al. “The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary.” Vol. VIII. Abingdon Press. Nashville, TN. 1995.