

The Light of Christ in the Lights of Christmas – Love
Psalm 30; Luke 1:46-55; John 3:16-21
December 18, 2011

Its perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible, and – these days – maybe a most controversial verse. John 3:16. The verse is often on a sign held up at public events. I suspect we'll see it somewhere in the stands of all the televised sports events this Christmas and New Year Season. Maybe it offends you – it does some people - To be so bold about one's faith. I guess now it's called the Tebow effect. Being openly faithful.

But if it is the heart of the message and the Bible, and it is, isn't it, then that great good news of God's love should be shared far and wide. John 3:16 - For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.

A few words – but they contain - 2 facts – a Condition – and 2 promises. God loved the world - God gave his only son. So that everyone who believes - should not perish, but have eternal life. Five key points of the good news of our faith – all on one hand.

The message for us to hear is that love lifts - lifts up - the meaning of life. The light of love lights the way to a better life than we now know. God loved. God gave. Death died. Life wins.

God's love, and our God-like love, lifts the meaning of our lives. To know that someone cares for you, in spite of all your foibles and failings that lift your life's meaning. And if you turn it around – it still works the same way. When you love another that lifts the meaning of their life - and your life, too. You experience a power in you to affect the life of another for good.

The full story about love is all there in the Christmas story. Love came down at Christmas. Love, all lovely and divine. Love was born at Christmas. Love that in Jesus Christ proved its power of hate and even death.

This year, let's see if we can come to Christmas this year, or let it come to us, as once it came to Mary and to Joseph and to Bethlehem – to angels and to shepherds, to wandering Kings, and to a world weary and waiting for some new reason to hope. Let's see if we can be ready for the richest deepest gift that Christmas has to give.

Please pray with me. We've wrapped it all up Lord, in the ribbons and wrapping paper of our holiday season's gifts to each other. But you surprised the world once, and you can do it again. Help us to hear your word to us anew this day, your word of truth, and goodness, your word of love in Christ. Amen.

Christmas is not hard to like. For all the pain in the pressures of the season, over booked for all of us with way too much to try to get in - almost no room for much of the deepest meaning and measures of joy to fit in.

For all the painful memories of loved ones lost awhile often triggered by the season, and family ties that can seem either too tight or too loose. In spite of all the noise of advertising and Christmas bashing that makes it hard sometimes to even think about the reason for the season.

In spite of all that clutters up the celebration of Christmas, still and yet - there's an awful lot to like about Christmas, isn't there? About that boy child of Mary. And the festive lights and the giving and the merry spirit and greetings of this time of year that remembers him.

But – that part of Christmas- if that's the only part or the major part of Christmas that we see - that part of Christmas will only be a short passing event to boost our spirits for a little while.

That part of Christmas, the waiting to welcome the baby in the manger, the celebration and gift giving that goes with it, that part of Christmas passes quickly into and out of our lives – over and over again.

It's a season, and we soon see it pass and pack it all up and put it away. Lights are dimmed. Trees go to the trash or better get recycled. Decorations are stored away. I have pity upon Ivan and the custodians storing away all that has brightened the church this season. And the giving spirit slows or is set aside for another year.

But – there is another aspect to Christmas that more than brightens a month once a year. There is at the heart of Christmas the message and the meaning that calls us to meet in it, in the celebration of the birth of that boy child of Mary, the hopes and the fears of all our years.

Christmas came, Christ came, to change our lives – forever. To call us to a new way of living, to be born again and grow into a new life in Christ. Christmas came, Christ came, that we might see and know more than a holiday that brightens our lives for season - but that we might know the wonder and power of a love that lifts and changes the whole meaning of our lives forever.

Christmas came, and Christ came – to call us to live so that more and more the world might see in us, and because of us, the presence of God's Kingdom here on earth – sees that the Lord's prayer might be fulfilled in some ways, small ways and ways not so small, through us. Thy Kingdom come on earth.

Shane Claiborne, author of the book, *The Irresistible Revolution*, and a leader of the Christian Community in Philadelphia called the Simple Way, tells this story.

The story is about Steven about the power of what God's love in Christ can do to us and for us.. and through us.

Steven, a lad about 8, said he was trying to figure out who invented the gun. Steven had seen daily deadly violence in his ghetto neighborhood. One day Steven ran up to Shane and said, Hey, I figured it out. Satan invented the gun. Satan? Shane asked. Yeah, Satan. Satan wants us to destroy each other, and so he gave us guns.

A couple of months later 9/11 happened. Shane wondered what Steven would think then about guns, and what he thought we should do. Steven said - Those people did a bad, bad thing. But don't we always say two wrongs don't make a right. Besides aren't we all one big family.

Right then, Steven, that little black boy, looked at Shane, that white adult, and said, with some wonder, hey, that means you and me are brothers. You and me are brothers.

Yes – a little black boy and a white adult – brothers. If that can be true, then - Love wins. One human family – God's creation – God's people - God's beloved poor ornery people – like you and like me. And we are brothers and sisters. Yes. And – in God's plan, in Christmas and in Christ, the whole world is the object of God's affection, and love - But then, of ours, too.

Ours too? God so loved the world. The whole world the object of our affection and love? How can that be in a world where there are people that hate us? But - How can it be any other way, in the world God made? Love, God's love, came down, to lift us up above our sin and separateness - to see and take all people in.

Christmas came, and Christ came - to call us to a new understanding of who we are. We are all children of the living God, called to be part of a new family where we are neither male or female, Jew or Greek, black or white, or even Muslim or Christian - but - all children of the same loving God. That's the light of love.

Sometimes, sometimes, we seem almost to get the message, to see the new meaning that love, God's love, brings to life. Sometimes we come close to being that new family God so loves. In West Bloomfield – Christians helped at Yom Kippur – volunteering for Jewish Friends. And at Christmas Jewish persons do the same for Christian neighbors. And yesterday I had an email from an Imam we hope to have visit us in February – saying a blessed Christmas to you and your people fellow believer in God.

In our prayers this year end – even as we give thanks for the end to the war in Iraq, even as we give thanks for those who gave their lives for our freedom, and as we pray in deep sympathy for the families who will forever have an empty place at their Christmas table, American families - We will do well to remember, too, the many families in Iraq, 100 times as many families in Iraq as in our country, who have paid the price for freedom, too.

For the light of God's love shines on all of God's children, hope and peace and joy and love that is larger and longer than this life we live.

Maybe the parade of Sharing Tree Gifts last Sunday is a sign for us not to be proud of what we did, but to be humbled by knowing we have the power to share with others who have so much less than we do. Is that what the wise men did? And when we bought alternative Christmas gifts at the Gift Fair, did we care, I pray we cared, to be sharing God's love with some of God's people we will never see, but who, aren't they, part of God's family, too. With me, with you. The light of love – shines.

Christmas tree lights shine this season from the Bell Tower of our Church, and the truth is, the true light of Christmas, of God's love in Christ, will only shine as far as we make it possible for the good works of this Church to grow – and to go.... Yes – by the light of the gifts of our love we give.

When we let the gift of God's Son, the babe of Bethlehem, and the man of Galilee, and the bearer of the cross, become our risen Lord and Savior - When we let his love for all God's people, capture our hearts, and direct our living. Then - then the love of God will lift the meaning of our lives, and we will have truly celebrated and understood the wonder of God's love, and the deepest and most lasting meaning of Christmas.

I share words about celebrating Christmas in a way that lets the light of Love shine bright: Pastor Dale Nelson of Grand Rapids wrote . . .

“It is a good thing to observe Christmas day. It reminds us to set our little watches, now and then, by the great clock of humanity which runs on Son time - Son time. But there is a better thing than the observance of Christmas day and that is to keep Christmas.

Are you willing to forget what you have done for other people and to remember what other people have done for you; to ignore what the world owes you and to think what you owe the world; to put your rights in the background, and your duties in the middle distance, and your chances to do a little more than your duty in the foreground; to own that probably the only good reason for your existence is not what you are going to get out of life, but what you are going to give to life; to close the book of your complaints against the management of the universe and look to see where you can sow a few seeds of happiness - then you keep Christmas.

If you are willing to stoop down and consider the needs and the desires of little children, to stop asking how much your friends love you, and ask yourself whether or not you love them enough; to bear in mind the things that other people have to bear on their hearts; to try to understand what those who live in the same house with you really want without having to be told; to trim your lamp so that it will give more light and less smoke; to make a grave for your ugly thoughts, and a garden for your kindly feelings; then you keep Christmas.

Are you willing to believe that love is the strongest thing in the world, stronger than hate, stronger than evil, stronger than death, and that the blessed life which began in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago is the image and brightness of eternal love; if you can do this, you keep Christmas all the year long. And you will show your love for God – and for all God's people. May more of that love come down for you this Christmas - and stay with you, and live through you, every day of the new Year of the Lord. Amen.

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