

Are You Prepared to Love?

Luke 1:26-38

Introduction

A friend told me about a Christmas Eve service he went to at a church I will not name. He said the pastor spoke for 15 minutes and didn't mention Mary, Joseph, or even the Baby Jesus. His sermon was "Love Came Down at Christmas" and was all about that, how somehow, someday, this unspecified love came down at Christmas. It never answered the questions, "Whose love was it?" "Who is the source of this love?" "What is love?" "God is love" is a very sound theological statement. But it's easy to say and doesn't mean anything if you don't identify love and unpack the message. We don't want to fall into that trap on this the Fourth Sunday in Advent, when the focus is on Love.

The Direction of Love

We may begin to think that we're talking about God's love for us and what He does for us to show us He loves us. That this is all about His comfort and care for us. But think about it in terms of the other three Sundays. God gives us hope to trust in Him and believe His promises. This isn't about some hope God has in us. He gives us His peace to be at peace with Him. This isn't about God having peace with us. He gives us the joy of salvation in His Son. This isn't about a joy God has in us. Now, do we think this love is all about how God loves us and wants to do what's best for us? He gives us love for a reason, so we can love Him and others. To see what I'm talking about, let's take a look at our Gospel lesson and Mary's visit by Gabriel.

Loved by God

"Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with You!" (v. 28). What a great greeting! To be called "favored one" and told that the Lord is with you; that's God's love and isn't that what it's all about? Yet, look at Mary's reaction. She was *greatly troubled* (v. 29) and was trying to discern what was going on. Sometimes, the Lord's love seems too overwhelming for us. We think, "What does God want with little old me?"

God's Assurance

That's when God must step in and reassure us that He knows what He's talking about, that His love is real. He may even share part of His plan with us, like He does with Mary. "Here's what's going to happen; you're going to have a baby. He's going to be great, in fact, He'll be known as God's Son. He's going to be the Messiah."

More Confused

Mary didn't know how she could have a baby, since she was still a virgin. She knew it was physically impossible. That's the problem when God tells us what He's going to do—it doesn't make sense. We think about it in human terms. We want to understand God, but we can't. There are many things about God that don't make sense to us—the Trinity, Real Presence, the dual nature of Christ, just to name a few. Some people try to use human reason to make sense of it, and when they can't they choose not to believe. But Gabriel reminds Mary that God's ways are above our ways and He can do

whatever He wants. He even gives her cousin Elizabeth as an example of God's power. When it comes to God's mysterious ways, we must just let go of our doubts and confusion and believe.

Obedience

Here is the result of being loved by God—obedience. *“Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (v. 38)*. When we realize God loves us and He has a plan for us, the obvious move is to submit and humbly obey Him. May we be like Mary and respond to God's love with humble obedience.

Means of Grace

We receive God's love through the means of grace. That's where we receive forgiveness of sins and a strengthening of our faith. And, just like Mary, God has a plan for us and wants to use us in His service. We may think, like Mary, we don't have much to offer. But that's OK. God has the plan and the power. He has the way. All He asks of us is to, like Mary, say, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to Your Word. In Your love, use Me as You wish.”

*And the peace of God,
Which passes all understanding,
Will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*
