

GOD MADE HIMSELF UNDERSTANDABLE

There is a story from the famous Danish philosopher from the mid 1800s, a Christian theologian named Soren Kierkegaard. It is a familiar story, a story rewritten by many over the ages in many different forms, yet it is still relevant today. Here's what he wrote:

A prince wanted to find a maiden suitable to be his queen. One day while running an errand in the local village for his father, he passed through a poor section. As he glanced out the windows of the carriage, his eyes fell upon a beautiful peasant maiden. During the ensuing days he often passed by the young lady and soon fell in love. But he had a problem. How would he seek her hand? He could order her to marry him. But even a prince wants his bride to marry him freely and voluntarily and not through coercion. He could put on his most splendid uniform and drive up to her front door in a carriage drawn by six horses. But if he did this he would never be certain that the maiden loved him or was simply overwhelmed with all of the splendor.

The prince came up with another solution. He would give up his kingly robe. He moved, into the village, entering not with a crown but in the garb of a peasant. He lived among the people, shared their

interests and concerns, and talked their language. In time the maiden grew to love him, because of who he was and because he loved her first.

This very simple, almost childlike story is what John is describing here--God came and lived among us. He had to reveal Himself to us in an understandable way, and this is precisely what Jesus did--became flesh just like you and me. He made Himself understandable.

(From a sermon by Rich Anderson, Love Came Down At Christmas, 12/16/2010)

Luke 1:26-38 ...26 In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And [the angel] came to her and said, "Rejoice, favored woman! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was deeply troubled by this statement, wondering what kind of greeting this could be. 30 Then the angel told her: Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 Now listen: You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will call His name JESUS (Yeshua). 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father

David.33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.34 Mary asked the angel, “How can this be, since I have not been intimate with a man?”35 The angel replied to her: The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the holy One to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 And consider your relative Elizabeth—even she has conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God.”38 “I am the Lord’s slave,” said Mary. “May it be done to me according to your word.” Then the angel left her.

One word that I think is descriptive of Christmas, is the word EMOTIONAL. During Advent and the Christmas season, perhaps more than at any other time of the year, our emotions are stirred in some special ways. As we reflect on the incomparable grandeur of the Christmas story, the dazzling displays of tinsel and Christmas lights, the cards and the greetings from our friends, the echoing refrain of Christmas carols, the gifts, the kaleidoscope of colors, the array of Christmas goodies, and the excitement dancing in the eyes of our children. All of these ingredients combine to make Christmas the most emotional time of the year. Today, as we look

back on that first Christmas, what are some of the emotions we find? Let me share four of them.

The first is WONDER.

In the first two chapters of his Gospel, Luke attempts to describe the emotions that came bubbling to the surface in some of the characters of that first Christmas drama. With quick brush strokes, Luke paints a picture of a baby being born, angels filling the heavens, and shepherds kneeling in stunned amazement, listening to the heavenly chorus. Then in verse 18 of the second chapter he says, “***And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them...***” Their wonder should be no surprise because their silent night had been split with the glorious presence of God. Their world and human history had been invaded by the Word of God. All the hopes of all the ages had been fulfilled in this one spectacular night, yet it happened so differently from the way that most people had expected. Instead of happening in some great world city in the center of the Roman Empire, the events of that first Christmas take place in the lives of somewhat ordinary people in a far off part of the world.

Yet there is a great deal of wonder in that story. When we think, for instance, of the love of Mary and Joseph, we wonder. It is easy for us to miss the

incredible dimension of their love. We have read or heard the story so often and the familiar songs of Christmas have so become so much backdrop to the Christmas season that it is easy for us to miss the wonder. For Mary and Joseph, the first Christmas event presented their love with an awesome challenge. Their marriage had not yet taken place when Mary conceived her son. Pregnancy before marriage is not so uncommon today, but for two pious Jews in the first century this was a crisis of unbelievable magnitude. Imagine the questions, the doubts, the misgivings, and the confusion that engulfed both of them, especially Joseph. It would have been the natural thing for Joseph to break off his engagement with Mary, for he was sure of one thing, the baby she was carrying was not his. But because of his love for Mary he turned his back on the wagging tongues of the community, the stares and the gossip, he swallowed his pride, and he accepted the incredible announcement of the angel that this was a special child given by God. And so when we think of Joseph's love, we wonder. Shepherds came, claiming that they had been told of Jesus by special messengers from God. Wise men came from afar, worshiping her son as the newborn king. Two old saints in the Temple—Simeon and Anna—told Mary they could now die in

peace because in the face of her infant son they had seen the hopes and fears of all the years.

At the age of twelve her son was already a match for the scholars of Israel. At the age of thirty her son became one of the most popular figures in the land. At the age of thirty-three her son was nailed to a cross as a criminal between two thieves, and she was there to watch him—suspended between the earth and the sky and left to die in the scorching sun. What an incredible strain was put on that mother's love. Yet through it all—from the spectacular beginning to the uncertainty of his ministry to the crushing cross to the final victory—Mary loved her son dearly. She never gave him up. When we see her love, we wonder. When we think of the love of God for us, which is at the heart of the Christmas story, we feel wonder. Even greater than Joseph's love for Mary, even greater than Mary's love for her son, is the love God had for us when he sent Jesus into the world to show us what life can and should be. It is so easy to be so accustomed to the Christmas story, so dulled to its incredible message, that we miss out on the emotions of that event and especially to miss wonder. But as we catch again the full view of splendor which the Christmas story presents, the emotion of wonder will once more come bubbling to the surface.

A second emotion of Christmas is LOVE.

Matthew in his Gospel tells of a happening at the birth of Jesus that Luke omits: the visit of the magi/the wise men from the east, who come bearing gifts for the newborn child. One little boy, reflecting on the story of the wise men and their gifts, told his Sunday school teacher that the wise men brought “gold, Frankenstein, and mermaids.” Though inaccurate in the details, this little boy caught the spirit of what they did—they brought gifts, gifts expressing their love for the newborn king; gifts that cost them something; gifts given as an expression of devotion.

At no other season of the year do people say that they feel warmer toward their fellow human beings, are more kind in their relationships, are more sympathetic toward other people’s needs, are more expressive of love than in the Christmas season.

Now some people see this expression of concern and compassion towards others as a temporary insanity that comes over us, but we know that it is not insanity, but sanity. It is the way that things are really supposed to be. Not just at Christmas, but all through the year. Because if there is anything the world needs, it is love. And while love might not make the world go round, it certainly makes the ride worthwhile, and we need more of it.

Dwight L. Moody, the famous evangelist, said a long time ago: “I tell you there is one thing that draws above everything else in the world and that is love.” More recently, the psychologist, Karl Menninger said: “*Love is the medicine for the sickness of the world.*”

And Christmas reminds us of that.

In the early 1500s, the great Protestant reformer, Martin Luther was preaching a sermon on the Christmas story. Luther asked his congregation to meditate/think on the events surrounding the birth of Jesus, as if it were their own story; and then, rather vividly, he pictured Mary as being tired, cold, frightened—so young and having to be both mother and midwife. And he pictured Joseph nervously trying to help as best he could. All of a sudden, while they were imagining the scenes Luther turned on his congregation. He had anticipated their reaction, and he said to them something like this: “I know what you are thinking. You are thinking, ‘If only I had been there. How quick I would have been to help with the baby.

I would have washed the linen. How happy I would have been to go with the shepherds to see the Christ child, or bring a gift to the manger with the wise men.’ Yes, you would say that because you now know how great Jesus is;

but if you had been there at the time, you probably would have been no better than the people at Bethlehem! What childish and silly thoughts! But why don't you do it now? You have Christ in your neighbor; so why don't you serve your neighbor now? For what you do to your neighbor, you do to the Lord Jesus Christ himself!"

As the hymn writer so aptly put it: "Love came down at Christmas," and what could be more fitting than to receive love, and then pass it on to others?

One of the reasons Christmas is so special is that it calls forth from all of us that love which helps make life not just easier to bear, but also meaningful.

Another emotion of Christmas is JOY

"Joy to the world, the Lord is come" is one of the songs we hear at Christmas. That song vividly expresses our emotions at Christmas. But I am not talking about the superficial joy and hollow smiles that some paste on their faces to hide the emptiness of their lives or the artificial happiness produced by stimulants whether alcohol or shopping! I am talking about the real joy that is rooted in a living, personal, growing, transforming relationship with Jesus Christ. Mary felt joy over Jesus. Like all parents, Mary felt pain and anguish and stress and concern

over her son. But she also knew real joy. Pervading her whole life from the beginning to the end, in the high times and the low ones, there was a deep sense of joy which came from her awareness of the part God was allowing her to play in the redemption of the world. Her joy was expressed in song in Luke 1 in a passage we call the "Magnificat" in which Mary sings about the majesty and grace of God. Joy is living in the awareness that God gives himself to us and will never let us go. Henri Nouwen reminds that: "Joy and laughter are the gifts of living in the presence of God and trusting that tomorrow is not worth worrying about."

In the Christmas story we also see that the angels felt joy over Jesus. "We bring you good news of great joy," they said. Why? Because this One whose birth they proclaimed was to become the Savior of the world. He was the one who came to show us what life is supposed to be. He is the one who comes with the key that can unlock the mystery and purpose of life.

At the end of chapter 2 Simeon and Anna in the Temple felt joy over Jesus. Why? Because of the hope the promised child brought to them in the midst of their struggles and problems.

When we realize again the significance of what happened on that special night long ago, we, also should feel joy.

To realize that God loves us enough to come all the way to where we are—that brings joy. To realize that God loves us enough to become what we are so we can become what he is—that brings joy. To realize that this Jesus whose birth we celebrate is One who can meet our deepest needs and provide solutions for the problems that threaten to overwhelm us and satisfy the longing of our soul—that brings joy.

A story is told about a man from Louisville, Kentucky, who had to travel to St. Louis on business. He had finished up his business late Saturday night, and had to stay over in St. Louis until the following Monday morning. On Sunday morning, he left the hotel looking for a place to worship. The streets were quite deserted, but finally he saw a police officer and asked for directions to the nearest church. The stranger thanked the officer for the information and was about to walk off when he turned and asked him: “Why have you recommended that particular church? There must be several churches nearby that you could have recommended.” The police officer smiled and replied: “I’m not a church person myself, but the people who come out of that church are the happiest looking church-people in St. Louis. I thought that would be the kind of church you would like to attend.”

We can relate to that, can’t we? Who doesn’t want to be around joyful, contented people? Now let me ask you: Is that what we are? Joyful, truly happy people who reflect real joy in ways that draw people to our fellowship and the Christ who gives us that joy?

We have to be honest. While joy is the birthright and gift of every child of God, it is easy for us to lose our joy. What does it take to rob you and me of our joy, especially during what should be the most joyful time of the year? Someone once put it this way: What causes more holiday headaches: a house full of relatives or the words: “Some assembly required”?

The Excedrin Headache Resource Center took a poll awhile back to find out what robs people of their joy at Christmas.

Here is the list of the ten top joy robbers they discovered during the holiday season:

- 1) fighting crowds and traffic;
- 2) not getting enough sleep and changing sleep patterns;
- 3) not having enough time to get everything done;
- 4) spending too much money;
- 5) eating or drinking too much;
- 6) skipping meals because of a busy schedule;
- 7) getting together with friends and family;
- 8) cooking and cleaning;

9) long plane/train/car trips; and
10) being apart from friends and family during the holidays. (“Holiday Pain,” Newsweek, December 18, 1995, p.8).

What would you add to this list?

Now some of these things can certainly put a damper on our Christmas spirit, but they don’t have to rob us of our joy if that joy is the joy that Christ gives.

Now that doesn’t mean that we won’t be short-tempered or frustrated or impatient with the demands and schedules surrounding Christmas. Some of us don’t take care of ourselves and push ourselves to the limit until we are exhausted and not fit to live with. But that really isn’t the joy that the Christmas message announces. That joy is the good news, the deep down settled conviction that God comes to us personally in Jesus and that no matter what the world throws at us, we are not alone and we are not helpless. That is joy.

Another emotion of Christmas is SADNESS.

Now this is not a contradiction of what I have just said about joy but an affirmation that, in the midst of

all the joy, there are some who find Christmas a difficult time, a challenging time, a heartbreaking time. Psychologists say that for many people Christmas is the most depressing time of the year. Sometimes the sadness comes because of the demands of the season. To others the sadness comes because they recognize more clearly than at other times the emptiness within. They see another year completed, yet no more has been accomplished in their lives. Most often the sadness of the Christmas season is caused by the awareness that the future will never be exactly like the past. Those who have to face Christmas without a loved one they lost during the year experience a certain degree of sadness in the midst of the Christmas celebrations. Some of the sadness is inevitable. The demands of the season are depressing at times. There are some people whose lives are empty. **Wonder, Love, Joy** and **Sadness** are all emotions of Christmas. And while we would like to

have more wonder , love and joy than sadness, are all emotions of Christmas.

Advent is that time of year that prepares us and enables us to enter into the emotions of Christmas. It reminds us that this world has been invaded by God and that it can never, ever be the same again. And we need that reminder because we can forget.

A middle-aged woman wrote a letter to Santa:

Dear Santa:

It has been a long time since I have written to you. I have moved from the old home on Happy Street to a house of loneliness and doubt which stands at the end of Disillusion Avenue. All the gloriously bright little baubles that I had in years gone by are now either broken or tarnished and tear-stained. Please bring me a few of those precious toys that I once had—the shining bubbles of joy; the tinkling bells of cheer that rang in my voice; the candles of faith that shone in my eyes; the frankincense and myrrh of steadfast hope that strengthened my soul; and the lode star of universal love that gleamed in my heart. I realize now that I did not appreciate those priceless treasures in the years past. I did not care for them as I should have. I let them slip away. But now I repent my carelessness. So I will hang my empty heart by the chimney, and humbly ask you to please bring me another supply of Christmas.

Now, while it is couched as a letter to Santa, here we have a moving expression of a woman who has realized sadly that somehow, somewhere along the way, she lost Christmas.

And so can we. This is the challenge and gift of Christmas. The challenge is to pause on our Advent journey and take a real look at ourselves and the things that we think matter in life and that drive us and see that God has given us a gift in Christ that satisfies and fulfills our deepest needs. And if we will do that during this Advent season we will rediscover the meaning and gift of Christmas

The Last emotion of Christmas is HOPE
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The facing of Christmas alone does hurt. Some of this sadness is inevitable. But the wonder and joy of Christmas is that a rediscovery of the true meaning of Christmas can help us deal with this sadness and even turn it into something that draws us closer to God and therefore draws us closer to life. For if Christmas means anything, it means hope, fulfillment, and peace, a sense of belonging and protection!

Peace comes because we do not march to the drumbeat of the world but to the drumbeat of the King of kings.

Fulfillment comes not from feasting on the delicacies on the world's table but from the One who is the Bread of Life.

Hope comes not from a denial of death but from the realization that not even death can eternally separate us from those we love who are in Christ.

A sense of belonging and protection comes with the personal experience of knowing and receiving Jesus into our hearts.

In 1994, two Christian missionaries answered an invitation from the Russian Department of Education to teach morals and ethics in a large orphanage. About 100 boys and girls who had been abandoned, abused, and left in the care of a government-run program were in the orphanage. It was nearing Christmas and they decided to tell them the story of Christmas. It would be the first time these children had heard the story of the birth of Christ. They told them about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem. Finding no room in the inn, the couple went to a stable, where the baby Jesus was born and placed in a manger. Throughout the story, the children and orphanage staff sat in amazement as they listened. Some sat on the edges of their stools, trying to grasp every word. When the story was finished, they gave the children three small pieces of cardboard to make a crude manger. Each child was given a small paper square, cut from yellow napkins that they had brought with them since no coloured paper was

available in the city. Following instructions, the children tore the paper and carefully laid strips in the manger for straw. Small squares of flannel, cut from a worn-out nightgown an American lady was throwing away as she left Russia, were used for the baby's blanket. A doll-like baby was cut from tan felt which the missionaries had also brought with them. It was all going smoothly until one of the missionaries sat down at a table to help a 6 year old boy named Misha. He had finished his manger. When the missionary looked at the little boy's manger, she was startled to see not one, but two babies in the manger. Quickly, she called for the translator to ask Misha why there were two babies in the manger.

Crossing his arms in front of him and looking at this completed manger scene, Misha began to repeat the story very seriously. For such a young boy, who had only heard the Christmas story once, he related the happenings accurately until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger. Then Misha started to ad-lib. He made up his own ending. He said, "And when Maria laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no mamma and I have no papa, so I don't have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with him. But I told him I couldn't, because I didn't have a gift to give him like

everybody else did. "But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I had that maybe I could use for a gift. I thought maybe if I kept him warm, that would be a good gift. So I asked Jesus, 'If I keep you warm, will that be a good enough gift' And Jesus told me, 'If you keep me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave me.' "So I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and he told me I could stay with him--for always." As little Misha finished his story, his eyes brimmed full of tears that splashed down his little cheeks. Putting his hand over his face, his head dropped to the table and his shoulders shook as he sobbed and sobbed. The little orphan had found someone who would never abandon nor abuse him, someone who would stay with him--FOR ALWAYS. He finally felt the love joy and Hope that he had been waiting for!

Invitation

Adapted from The Emotions of Christmas

Luke 1:26-38 | Sermon | First Sunday of Advent | 30 November 2008 Rev. Dr. Jeff Sharp
Lead Pastor • English Congregation • Vancouver Chinese Baptist Church • Vancouver, British
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