

12.18.22 – Advent 4 - LOVE
“Preparing to Receive Love”
The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Romans 1:1-7 (GNT) ~ Pam

¹ From Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus and an apostle chosen and called by God to preach his Good News.

² The Good News was promised long ago by God through his prophets, as written in the Holy Scriptures. ³ It is about his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ: as to his humanity, he was born a descendant of David; ⁴ as to his divine holiness, he was shown with great power to be the Son of God by being raised from death. ⁵ Through him God gave me the privilege of being an apostle for the sake of Christ, in order to lead people of all nations to believe and obey. ⁶ This also includes you who are in Rome, whom God has called to belong to Jesus Christ.

⁷ And so I write to all of you in Rome whom God loves and has called to be his own people: May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

L: These are the Words of Paul sharing God’s Love! All: Thanks be to God!

Matthew 1:18-25 (HCSB)

The Nativity of the Messiah

¹⁸ The birth of Jesus Christ came about this way: After His mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, it was discovered before they came together that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ So her husband Joseph, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her publicly, decided to divorce her secretly.

²⁰ But after he had considered these things, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is by the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to name Him Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins.”

²² Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ See, the virgin will become pregnant
and give birth to a son,
and they will name Him Immanuel,
which is translated “God is with us.”

²⁴ When Joseph got up from sleeping, he did as the Lord’s angel had commanded him. He married her ²⁵ but did not know her intimately until she gave birth to her firstborn son. And he named Him Jesus.

Leader: These are Words of Love from God. All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Dear Lord and Savior, now in our last week of Advent Love, please help us to prepare to receive the perfect love you have for us. As Christ is the bridegroom of the church, may we be as devoted to him as a husband and wife show love for each other. Let us receive your love so that we can share it with others often. If we do not yet feel your sacrificial love this season, help us to open our hearts and minds to

intentionally receive it now. Be with those who cannot be here and speak now through the Scriptures and this messenger's voice. Amen.

Merry Christmas! Only one week away! Thank you to our many helpers today who placed and will continue to help with the poinsettias those who brought a dish: planned for our Christmas Eve service: and joined us for breakfast yesterday. Thank you to our leaders who will meet about church business after the service, and to Pastor Young, his wife Belynda, her team, and New Beginning Missionary Baptist Church who are hosting our fellowship lunch today at 1:30 downstairs. We have so much for which we are grateful.

Today is the Fourth and last Sunday of Advent – Love. We have only a week in this period of preparation and watchfulness for the Messiah's birth! We must prepare ourselves to receive the love of God through Jesus before we can give our love or Christ's love for us away to others. So today, we start much later in the Christian story with the apostle Paul. In his letters, but especially this one to the Romans, he introduces himself as a servant of Christ and his apostle, a messenger of good news. By Paul's time, the crucifixion affirmed Jesus' humanity, and the resurrection affirmed his divinity. Paul proclaims to them that Jesus is and was the seed of David and is and was the Son of God.

Paul had never actually been to Rome, so he needed to explain his credentials: how he had seen Jesus personally and been called to serve him. Remember that Paul was a Roman citizen by birth only, born in a free province of Rome, called Cilicia, but had not traveled to the city of Rome itself. He was a former Pharisee, a Jew who followed all the rules and had grown up expecting a Messiah. Paul had committed many crimes

against the followers of Christ (recall the stoning of Stephen) in the name of the Roman Empire. And then he met Jesus! The sudden forgiveness that the resurrected Christ bestowed on such a man had to be a supernatural love because Paul did not deserve it! He was compelled to share his testimony and this love with others. His calling was clear.

We often think of Paul (because of paintings we've seen and his three-shipwreck survival record) as a rugged, strong, brash, and determined man; yet in this year's study, I see him in a new light of **humility**. He was a person with a past he wasn't proud of, yet an independent man who had been changed by Jesus Christ himself on that road to Damascus! He was a man who received this amazing love from Christ who died for humankind's sin yet was raised from death by God's love and power to join God again and sit at his right hand. Forgiveness and undeserved grace were Paul's tangible signs of God's love! He received such grace with a perplexed spirit yet did so willingly as God's new apostle to share this personal testimony of love with the Romans and other territories in his missionary travels.

We heard a different quandary for Joseph. In the tradition of ancient Jewish marriages, two families would agree to a union and negotiate a betrothal. Then they made a public announcement of this "pledge." The only way to stop this process of waiting a year without intimacy was through death or divorce. The waiting period affirmed the bride's purity. For Joseph, Mary's pregnancy was a problem; the law called for stoning an unfaithful wife. He wanted to spare the families public shame, so decided secretly to divorce her (or break the engagement) with a private

ceremony with only two witnesses, usually a priest (Numbers 5:11-31).

But . . . for . . . God!

An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, explaining that the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and not another man. The messenger conveyed God's love; you are to call him Jesus, Greek for Joshua, meaning "the Lord saves" (from sin not death or the government). All happened to fulfill the Old Testament prophecies. This kind of love was not candles, flowers, or intense emotional love. Joseph's response to obey God shows sacrificial love on many levels – he sacrificed his reputation, his family's, and his faith standing in the community – all for God's love of Mary and humankind. What compassion!

God's love for us calls his people to be ready to receive and to share this love! As we approach the day Christ was born, let us reframe our understanding of love. During this year's Advent lessons, we have been trying to empty ourselves of the trappings of commercial Christmas and daily living: distractions, lists, overspending, overeating, stress, grief, fear, or worry. I have been encouraging this not only for our health (although that is important too!), but so that we can get our heads and hearts around receiving this kind of sacrificial love from God, a love that bore shame and ridicule, but also an amazing love of grace and forgiveness that would save the world and all who are in it!

How can that love not be shared with others who have no faith?! It is our calling! It might be as simple as making a phone call to someone who's in pain or upset. It might be as simple as becoming friends with a bowling team of ladies. It might be as simple as shopping for someone who cannot get out or afford to eat properly. We must feel God's love in

our hearts first; are we prepared to receive this kind of unspeakable love when someone shows it to us? Paul was made blind for days and had to accept help to get around; that meaningful gift convinced him of Christ's role to share God's love with him. Joseph may not have been prepared, but in his sleep, he accepted the love and message brought to him by God's angel. That acceptance allowed him to share sacrificial love with Mary, her family, and the baby Jesus. What extraordinary responsibility these men had!

This week, please continue to watch for the extraordinary love in the ordinary details of living. Watch for the **transformational love** God is preparing you to receive in Christ. And listen in that love and expectation for the work or words God is giving you this season of Christ's birth. Will you continue or begin this process of emptying this week? What else do you need to let go of to accept and share LOVE in your life and community? Name it. Then let it go. Leave it at this altar for God's healing and renewal or come talk to me. You will find God's Love if you prepare your heart to receive it. Then we'll come together in anticipation on Christmas Eve and in celebration on Christmas Day. Keep watch! Amen! ||

Will you pray with me? God of love and grace, thank you for these words to remind us that *Emmanuel* is why we are here today. May our love for you grow and demonstrate to the world your love for humanity. Help us to consciously empty our minds of distraction so we may watch and wait for the Christ child to be born. Bring transformational **LOVE** into our lives, our church, and the world. Thank you, oh Lord, for Joseph and Paul's commitment to you, as we ask these things in Jesus' name, **Amen.**