

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
Dr. Jonathan Dent
"Amour"

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Advent IV
Christmas Sunday

For many of us, the experience of love is as ambiguous as speaking a second language. That's why I've used the French word for love as the sermon title. We may know a few words in the second language (or third or fourth), but it's not the same as our original language where the words come so easily and readily. Love is something I know something about, but every time I really think I know something about it, something new is revealed that makes me wonder if I really know anything at all.

Love is a gift. Love gives us belonging and a sense of ourselves. Love is at the core of who we are.

Love provides the context for wanting to live, for wanting to care, for wanting to go on. Love moves us beyond ourselves, even after fixing in us enough base, enough foundation to be ourselves.

Love watches over our children as their days increase; blesses and guides them wherever they maybe; strengthens them to meet each new day; comforts them when discouraged or sorrowful; raises them up if they should fall. Love brings peace and trust in God.

Love finds a way when there seems to be none. This is what Isaiah records about God's interaction with the one of the wicked kings of the Bible, Ahaz. God asks him to ask for anything, and he refuses. Out of that refusal, out of that slap in God's face comes one of the most beautiful promises and prophecies of the Scripture. "Okay, that's your choice. Let me tell you I will find a way to become human just like you. I will find a way to rescue you from yourselves, ever since you chose to rebel rather than agree with me, God says. I will make sure a young woman who has never had a child, and never been in a sexual encounter with a man, will find herself pregnant by the Holy Spirit, with her agreement. She will bring forth a son whose name will mean: God is with us."

Nothing had ever been heard like this before. Human beings kept on breaking God's law, and rebelling against God's plan, both within Israel and outside Israel. Now God was going to do something new to show his love.

Joseph couldn't believe it either. Seven hundred years after Isaiah's prophecy, all Joseph knew was that his fiancée was pregnant. He knew she wasn't pregnant with his child. He loved her. He wouldn't turn her into the authorities who would probably have her stoned to death for the pregnancy outside of wedlock, as was the customary sentence in those days. He would quietly break off the engagement and wish her the best in a very difficult situation.

Times were tough during the military occupation of the Romans. Joseph would go on with his life the best he could. He made up his mind as he was going to bed that night. But in the middle of the night, he had a revelation from God through an angel telling him to stay engaged to Mary, and that the story about something happening to her by the Holy Spirit and not another man was true. Now if you or I had had that dream, we might say we shouldn't eaten that pizza so late last night, or perhaps partied so hard, or "ah, that was nutting." But in those days, such dreams were taken quite seriously. And it is good Joseph took it seriously. He took it so seriously that he named that baby as he was told. Joshua is a lovely name. It is a redemptive name, that he will save people from their rebellion, and they shall receive all that they need from the Lord. It was Joshua who trusted God enough as a spy in the promised land to suggest that the people of God could take the land promised to them by God. It was Joshua who led not that generation who didn't believe while in the desert, but the next believing generation into the promised land.

And now it is this new Joshua who will fulfill all the promises of God and lead whoever believes into the promised land of God's presence, grace and peace. Joshua is a good name. Now they were still using Greek as the common language of trade, just as they use English across all the airports of the world these days. So in Greek (and also similarly in Latin, that horrid language of the military domination), they named him Iesus, Yesus, Jesus.

Joseph was also reminded that it was Isaiah who said he would be called "Emmanuel" which means "God with us." This was harder to understand, except that, surely the person who would be the new Joshua, would need the presence of the Lord to accomplish whatever he would accomplish. Both Joseph and Mary knew the little child would become something great, but probably had not understand they had the responsibility of guardianship of

God become human, the Messiah, the Saviour. If they had understood, perhaps the whole project would be too daunting.

But of course, we know the end of the story from the beginning. But like love, every time we read it, there is something new, something wonderful that we have not understood before.

This time for me, I see the cost to the Father who lost the Son to this project, who had been eternally with himself and the Holy Spirit. He had to give up his Son. There was so much love there that perhaps there was no fear in this. I can't say. The fear of God usually refers to our fear, not God's. Yet here God was experiencing loss, a loss greater than ten thousand life times of loss for us.

All of this is for you, for me. And how appropriate it is to come to the Table of the Lord, to experience such love tangibly here and now. Here we wonder at that loss. Here we experience that gain which is put into our account as we register our name as a follower of Jesus the Messiah, the King.

Here we say, "yes" to that which God does for us that we cannot do for ourselves. Here we say, "Have your way through me." Here we say, "Not my will be done, but Yours." Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done.

Here. Now. This Christmas.

The honest truth is that I hardly know how to take that love in. But just like a hug or a kind word, I simply receive.

Let's do that here. Simply receive.

Let us pray.