

GOD IS STILL SPEAKING: LOVE

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us.’ ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

(Matthew 1:18-25, NRSV)

Do you remember as a child having your heart set on that one special gift? For several months now our son, Matthew, has wanted a toy called the HoverCopter. According to the manufacturer, “The incredible HoverCopter blasts off like a rocket and hovers in mid-air...It’s a UFO, an Unbelievably Fun Object!” Matthew has gone so far as to tell us that the HoverCopter is his “heart’s desire.” So what’s a parent to do? Why buy the HoverCopter of course.

Our daughter, Alina, on the other hand, has asked for nothing for Christmas. This doesn't make her superior, just uninformed. It's a reminder that she's only 3 and that last Christmas she was living in a Ukrainian orphanage. With Matthew's help she's learning about Christmas very quickly. Her favorite Christmas song is the sacred "Santa Claus Is Coming To Town." Watching Alina decorate her first Christmas tree gave me multiple lumps in my throat. I took a picture of Alina putting her very first ornament on the tree, a small manger scene complete with Mary, Joseph, and Baby Jesus. Alina has been thoroughly drawn into every aspect of the Christmas story, both secular and sacred. She loves to wear a red Santa hat around the house and respond to us only when we address her as Santa Claus. On the other end of the spectrum she loves seeing art work of Baby Jesus. Some times she will only respond to us if we call her Baby Jesus.

Last week I walked into the Manhasset Library carrying Alina in my arms. She was dressed head to toe in red and wore her Santa cap. A nice man said to me, "Oh, I see you're carrying Santa Claus." Alina, whose English gets clearer by the day, shot back, "No! I'm Baby Jesus!" The man looked appropriately shocked. I suppose on Christmas Eve we'll have to wrap her in swaddling clothes and lay her in a manger. Since Matthew's HoverCopter lights up maybe we can follow the star too.

Whether it's HoverCopters or a plate of homemade cookies, gift giving is an important part of the Christmas season. Sometimes we buy gifts for people in need, such as those on our Angel Tree. Many times we buy gifts for those who don't really need anything. And that's okay because a gift from the heart can serve as a reminder of a loved one's significance in our lives. Has it gone too far in our consumer culture? Sure, but it can be such fun to buy people their heart's desire, especially if it is a UFO, an Unbelievably Fun Object!

I hope by now that you have finished most of your Christmas shopping. We've bought gifts for our children and our parents. We've made cookies for neighbors and coworkers. As we're focusing on all these gifts for others, let us not forget the amazing gift, which has been given to each and everyone of us, that sweet little trembling baby born in a barn 2,000 years ago. He was and is the greatest gift humanity has ever received.

To one person Jesus didn't seem like such a gift at all, at least not at first. Joseph was engaged to marry a woman whom he thought was a fine upstanding person. He must have thought otherwise when he heard the news that Mary was pregnant. How his heart must have sunk upon hearing the shocking news that she was going to have a baby. After all, he knew he wasn't the father. It would have been natural to seek revenge upon learning such news. Joseph could have sought to publicly humiliate Mary and her family. He could have dragged her down to the synagogue or the courts to receive punishment for infidelity. He could have done a lot of mean and cruel things if he had been a mean and cruel man, but he wasn't. And besides, he loved Mary. And while he didn't feel right about proceeding with the marriage, he didn't want their breakup to be a public spectacle either. Today's biblical text tells us that he wanted to quietly break things off.

Before he could carry out his plan something changed. Joseph dreamed a dream from the very heart of God. In the dream an angel tells him not to be afraid to wed Mary because the child she carries is the very Son of God. Upon waking Joseph had a choice; he could possibly ruin his reputation by marrying an already pregnant woman. Or he could take a leap of faith, do as the angel commanded, and hope for the best. My guess is that he never regretted being Jesus' earthly father. No doubt Jesus became a gift to Joseph as any child becomes a gift to lucky parents.

But in a very different way Jesus has become a gift to us as well. God sent us Jesus to free us from lives of guilt and aimlessness. God sent us the gift of Jesus to teach us how to live, to show us how to love. God sent us Jesus that we might live life to the fullest.

Part of living life to the fullest means passing along God's gift of love to others. Lutheran minister Edward Markquart reflects that, "Jesus was sent by God to earth to give us what we really [need]: to free us from our selfishness and fill our hearts with love. When our hearts are filled with love, we give from the fullness of our hearts to those in need. Christmas is about giving, giving from the fullness of our hearts, giving to people who need the gifts. Like the three Wise Men, bringing their gold, frankincense and myrrh to the Christ child. Their hearts were filled with love, and out of love, the wise men gave gifts to the infant Jesus who was in need of those gifts...Like Amahl in *Amahl and the Night Visitors* bringing his crutch to give to the child born to be king. Christmas is a story about a special kind heart filled with love and giving gifts of love to those [in] need"

http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_a_the_birth_of_christ_and_christmas.htm).

Rev. Markquart serves on the Board of Lutheran World Relief. He recounts a story of being in Tanzania and visiting a woman who received a cow from Heifer Project International. As many of you know, Heifer Project donates farm animals to individuals and families experiencing poverty and hunger. People accepting animals receive training in sustainable agriculture and agree to donate some of their animal's offspring to other people in need. Rev. Markquart reports that after several years, the woman in Tanzania had a small herd of cattle. Clearly that first cow made a big difference in her life and subsequently in the life of the whole village. Expressing her gratitude, the woman said, "Jesus gave me this cow, by first giving you and your people a heart of love" (Ibid.). When we're open to the

Spirit of God in our lives, when we allow God to give us a heart of love, the revolution of love begins and the ripples go on and on beyond our wildest and most holy dreams.

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of Love, let us, like Joseph, dream God's dreams of holy love. And may God's dream of dreams, even Jesus our Bethlehem born Savior, inspire and sustain us, not only at Christmas but the whole year through. God is still speaking: love. AMEN.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only
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The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, you have given us so many good gifts: a beautiful world in which to live, joyous music to lift our hearts, beloved families and friends to share this life, and most of all the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ. As we recall his lowly birth in this sacred season, may we feel deep in our souls the true significance of Christmas: the gift of Jesus to people everywhere. As we receive your love, help us respond with gifts of our own. Inspire us to share with the hungry, the refugee, the homeless. Guide our hopes and dreams that together we might build a better, more peaceful world. Encourage us to share our sorrow and sadness with you, O God, knowing how deeply you care for each of us.

We thank you, dear God, for the joy and delight of Christmas, through Jesus Christ we pray. AMEN.