

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Warm welcome, everyone, to Immanuel Lutheran Church, and happy Christmas Eve to you. I mean to speak this evening of love, for 'twas love created Christmas. "For God *so loved the world* that he gave his only begotten Son..." He gave his Son to this world. He gave him to be born in a stable in Bethlehem. It was our Maker's love for you and for me that caused the angels to constitute themselves into a choir and to salute this world's Saviour, singing "Glory to God in the Highest, and peace to his people on earth."

And here on earth, there was a similarity to the divine love: I mean the love between the young girl Mary and her beloved, her Joseph. My text, then, is from this evening's Gospel Lesson, St. Luke 2:4-5:

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused *wife* [what a holy word!], being *great with child* [another holy word!].(Luke 2:4-5, KJV)

I mean to start this sermon with a passage from a Christmas sermon by my theological hero Martin Luther. Like many of the great preachers through the ages, Luther used his eloquence to express sorrow and sympathy for young Mary, the mother of our Lord. And, naturally, that is proper. In fact, later in this liturgy, we mean to include a petition in our intercessions "For all expectant mothers, especially those who feel unprepared and fearful, that all will go well with them and with their babies." So, Luther preaches a passage along these lines. Luther absolutely loved Christmas and wrote many wonderful Christmas sermons, including tender words of sympathy for the plight of Mary. I am going to read such a passage to you now, and I believe what Luther says with all my heart. But also, I have another point of view I want to share with you. Here is the Luther quote:

In the first place, notice how ordinarily and simply things take place on earth, and yet they are held in such high respect in heaven! This is what takes place on earth: there is a poor, young woman, Mary, in Nazareth. Nobody pays any attention to her, and she is considered to be one of the least significant inhabitants of the town. Nobody realizes the great wonder she is carrying. She is silent, does not put on airs, and considers herself the lowliest person in town.... Let us assume Mary had a donkey to sit on, although the Gospel account does not mention this and it is likely that she walked on foot with Joseph...and yet she deserved to be carried in a gilded coach and with the greatest pomp. How many wives and daughters of great lords were living at that time in splendid circumstances and in great honor, while here this woman, the mother of God, journeys across country on foot, in the midst of winter, in the last stages of pregnancy! Oh, what injustice!

But the birth itself was even more pitiful: nobody took pity on this young woman who was about to give birth for the first time; nobody took to heart the heaviness of her body; and nobody cared that she was in strange surroundings and did not have any of the things which a woman in childbirth needs. Rather, she was there without anything ready, without light, without fire, in the middle of the night, alone in the darkness. Nobody offered her any of the services which one naturally renders to pregnant women. Everyone was drunk and roistering in the inn, a throng of guests from everywhere, and nobody bothered about this woman. (Martin Luther, *The Gospel For Christmas Eve*, Luke 2[:1–14], from his *Wartburg Postil*, 1521-22)

And so it is that Luther writes most tenderly about the suffering of Mary. Again, I believe every word of what Luther said.

And yet there is another side of the story, and if you have ever been young and in love, *you* know that side of things too. Mary and Joseph have found each other. They have won each other's heart. They have thrown in their lot together. They mean to face the future together, for as long as their hearts are beating.

They are poor, most probably, but, then, many a young couple has been poor, without two nickels to rub together. But also, Mary and Joseph are rich—rich in love! They have the strength and optimism of youth on their side. They might have traveled in midwinter, with Mary heavy with child, but they traveled together, they traveled *together*, and by God's grace, they found comfort and joy in each other, though their circumstances were hard.

Love never seemed so holy to me as when my beloved Carol was pregnant with our boys. Her kiss, the touch of her hand, the feel of her body — nothing was so holy and so full of joy as those days when we were awaiting the birth of our sons.

And it is easy enough for me to believe that young Mary and young Joseph were head-over-heels in love with each other and both deeply moved by this birth — a birth to which they both consented and which they counted holy. Though Joseph was not the father of this holy child, still he meant to be the protector of this child, and so he is honored to this day: Joseph, Protector of the Holy Family.

What good days they were, I do believe it. In this troubled world, babies are sometimes born without benefit of doctor or nurse. Sometimes babies are born to a young mother alone, who fights through her pain and fear and delivers her firstborn child. At least Mary had Joseph. And the two of them fought their way through to the birth of this holy Child. What a good night that must have been. Let the fancy ladies in Jerusalem sleep in their fancy beds. Let the drunken men laugh and cavort in the inn nearby. God bless them all! But in the manger, something wonderful and joyful happened. Mary and Joseph together celebrated the birth of this world's Savior, this little child which they now hold in their hands with the love and joy so many young parents have known as their hold their little one for the first time. What good days those must have been, I say!

And all of this joy on earth was brought to pass because of a similar love and joy up in heaven. Imagine that. Love up in heaven, for you and for me!

“In the beginning was the Word,” St. John says:

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1, KJV)

But what kind of Word was that — that Word that was in the beginning and was with God and was God? Why, it is the word of love for you, my dear ones before me now on this Christmas Eve. And it is the nature of love that it longs to reach out, to become real and concrete in the life of the beloved. Love cannot abide to remain silent. And on that first Christmas Eve, divine Love let loose and spoke forth on earth. Our Maker could no longer keep his Love to himself, lest he pop!

Oh, the love of God for humanity is ancient and deep as the Grand Canyon, and on Christmas, that love took flesh and came to dwell among us forevermore.

And let us not imagine that such divine is expressed only in the New Testament. Israel knew of that love long before the Church even came into existence. We read of that divine love in most romantic terms in the *Song of Songs*. The ancient preachers of the Church, for example, could hardly keep themselves from interpreting a passage like this as the church rejoicing in the love of God for her. It is a passage about love and about time — how the time has come for expressing love:

¹⁰My beloved [God Most High, the Maker of heaven and earth!] spake, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.

¹¹For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone;

¹²The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land;

¹³The fig tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away. (Song of Songs, 2:10-13, KJV)

And so it is that our Beloved in heaven judged that the time *had come*, “For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over, and gone.” Aye, the fullness of time had come. And so we have the testimony of St. Paul about Christmas:

⁴But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. (Galatians 4:4, NRS)

And so Jesus, the very Son of God and the very Word of God, descended to earth, born of Mary, born in a stable, to be with those he loves. I mean you, dear ones!

Sometimes I think that Christmas reveals a divine love for us that would almost frighten us if we knew its depths.

But we have a measure of those depths in Mary’s little Child. For he grew up, under the protection of Mary and Joseph, loved everyone in sight who was willing, and died a horrible death on the cross rather than to give up and leave you or me behind.

Never fear, then, that you are unloved in this world. Never fear it for your life as a whole, nor for any stretch of that life, even if, for a while, you are feeling awfully alone in this world. “Love bears all things,” St. Paul says. “Love believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Mary and Joseph were husband and wife, and their love let them bear the hardship of those days, all the way to the birth of this world’s Savior. Likewise, God’s love for you let him bear all things, even the heartbreak of death on the Cross, for he loves you and does not mean to lose you.

And so it is that from beginning to end, Christmas is about love — the kind of love that young people like Mary and Joseph knew on earth, and the kind of divine love by which you are held in the heart of our Maker, the kind of divine love that puts us at our best when we surrender ourselves to it, and the kind of divine love that shall save us. For unto us is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.