

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
Christmas Eve, December 24, 2023
Luke 2:1-20
What the World Needs Now

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

The Christmas story is a story loaded with love, glad to say. It is flooded with feeling, awash with affection, filled with the best emotions our world can muster.

Well, to begin with, there is the love that a young man has for his bride – the love of Joseph for his Mary. They travel together over the long miles from Nazareth all the way to Bethlehem. Such travel gave opportunity to Joseph to do the best he could for his young wife. If they had a donkey for the trip, I bet he let her ride it, while he walked mile after mile. She was heavy with child. But also she was carried along and helped by the love of her young husband. Another man might have rejected Mary, for she was pregnant, but not with his child. But Joseph certainly did not reject Mary, but rather sheltered her and baby Jesus, so that in church tradition, Joseph bears the lovely title “Protector of the Holy Family.” So, that is the love of a husband for a wife.

And then there is the love of a mother for her child. My wife, Carol, is very fond of the saying, “Do not let anything come between a mother bear and her cubs.” Likewise, do not let anything threaten a human mother’s little one. When those shepherds come to see the sight, they find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes. Mary might have been young, but she took the time to learn how to take care of a newborn. Mary loved Jesus all of his life. She became his disciple and was true to him all the way to the cross. When many of the Twelve had fled and abandoned Jesus, not Mary. She is there with her son as he breathed his last breath.

I am speaking about love – love on display on the first Christmas.

When you young folks in the congregation grow old like me, you will have the right to think back to your youth and to think to yourself, “Those were good days!” So it is with this old man. I think back to my youth and think that they were good days. From this perspective of more than threescore and ten years, I look back and think the days of my youth were days of innocence and hope.

There was a song back then, for example, called “What the World Needs Now Is Love.” It was a Burt Bacharach/Hal David song, sung by Jackie DeShannon back in 1965. Our school bus driver would play the current songs over the radio, with speakers at various points in the school bus. WCAO AM radio from Baltimore, Maryland would play the Beatles and Motown and songs like this one, “What the World Needs Now Is Love.” I’ve asked Teresa

and Zac to play the chorus and first verse for us, and being good sports, they are going to sing from a song before their time:

[Chorus]

What the world needs now is love, sweet love
It's the only thing that there's just too little of
What the world needs now is love, sweet love
No, not just for some but for everyone

[Verse 1]

Lord, we don't need another mountain
There are mountains and hillsides enough to climb
There are oceans and rivers enough to cross
Enough to last until the end of time

[Chorus]

What the world needs now is love, sweet love
It's the only thing that there's just too little of
What the world needs now is love, sweet love
No, not just for some but for everyone

When I say that the days of my youth seem pretty innocent and hopeful to me, I mean things like this song. It reached number seven in the Hot 100 in July of that year, 1965. Young folks nowadays might think the song pretty lame, but think of the imaginations, the hopes and dreams of a generation that prized a simple song like this about love.

Well, it turns out that our Maker likes this song too. And on that first Christmas, he gave his answer – his good and holy answer. I imagine him thinking to himself, “What the world needs now, is love, sweet love,” and he lets it be! He lets his only begotten Son be born into our world, to be held in the arms of that young mother, Mary, and to permit our world to be loved by our best and greatest lover, even Jesus Christ our Lord.

Judging by the Bible, there are all kinds of good things we could say about Jesus. We could say that he is brave, he is disciplined, he is smart, he can do wonders and miracles. But above all, we can say that Jesus is a man of love. That is what Christmas has brought us: a Man of love to be in charge of this world.

Was not that his striking teaching in the Sermon on the Mount? He spoke of love — even love that surpasses normal ways of thinking. And so we read this:

⁴³Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. ⁴⁴But I say unto you,

Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; (Matthew 5:43-44, KJV)

And when the lawyer asked Jesus about the great commandment in God's holy law, he answered simply by speaking of love:

³⁷And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. ³⁸This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Matthew 22:37-38, RSV)

And when St. Peter was preaching to Cornelius about Peter's beloved master, Peter could put the point most simply. He could speak of Jesus and of how...

he went about doing good... (Acts 10:38, RSV)

What a magnificent summary of a human life. I wish it could be said of me with the thorough-going honesty that it was said of Jesus: "He went about doing good." Jesus is a man of love.

It is a family trait of the Holy Trinity to be preoccupied by love. Not only does Jesus grow up to be a man of love, but the whole project of the incarnation of God the Son expresses the love of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. And so we cherish those verses from John 3:

¹⁶For God so *loved* the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. ¹⁷For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. (John 3:16-17, KJV)

So, on Christmas Eve I say to all you who labor under life's heavy load, at least this much is true and is very important: You live in a world whose ruler is a Man of love. That is what Christmas has brought us. For some of us, we have reached the stage in life where we do not need many Christmas presents. A Christmas card would be nice, and certainly Christmas dinner with the family is great! But we do not need many more *things*. We are more inclined to simplify life. And for those of you who are not yet at that stage of life, so that Christmas presents really can help you along in life, still my Christmas theme is the same: You can take everything else from me, but do not take this: Do not take this truth about the universe, that what the world

really needed was love, sweet love, and that is what our holy God brought us on that first Christmas Eve in the birth of the Babe of Bethlehem, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.