

God with Us Brings Love

If you weren't with us last week or if Advent is unfamiliar to you, let me briefly explain our journey toward Christmas. The word *advent* means "coming" or "arrival," and the season is marked by expectation, waiting, anticipation, and longing. Advent is not just an extension of Christmas—it is a season that links the past, present, and future. Advent offers us the opportunity to share in the ancient longing for the coming of the Messiah, to celebrate His birth, and to be alert for His second coming. Advent looks back in celebration at the hope fulfilled in Jesus Christ's coming, while at the same time looking forward in hopeful and eager anticipation to the coming of Christ's kingdom when He returns for His people. During Advent we wait for both—it's an active, assured, and hopeful waiting. And each week, we focus on a different attribute of God represented in the coming of Jesus: hope, love, joy, and peace.

A few years ago the Muppets and CeeLo Green co-performed a Christmas song called "All I Need Is Love," complete with a music video. In true Muppets form—I don't know how many Muppets fans we have—but if you haven't seen it, it's full of action and humor, and all the favorites show up—from Kermit, Fozzie, and Miss Piggy to Pepe, Gonzo and his chickens, and all the rest.

CeeLo and the crew sing about all the Christmas presents they could get—fancy toys and the latest technology. But—perhaps ironically—at its core, the song captures the true message of Christmas. The Muppets and CeeLo don't want all that stuff. All they want or need for Christmas is love.

LET'S TAKE A LOOK: Video – All I Need Is Love

What do you want for Christmas, Cee Lo?

For Christmas?

All I need is love

Color-coordinated Bentleys

Watches, car, the agent sent me

A sixty inch in every room

All I wanna see is you

Got the cash to take vacations

To a beach in every nation

I don't wanna be a Scrooge

But I'm not going without you

All I need is love

Diamonds on my mistletoe

But that can't buy you love, you know

Yeah, I'd give it all away

For just the chance to see your face

I'd take a jet or hop a train

Or maybe Rudolph knows the way? I don't know!

All I need is love

I'm quite sure the Muppets never set out to make any grand theological statements with their Christmas song, but the song taps into the truth that all we do need *is* love. Today as we celebrate together the second Sunday on our Advent journey of God with Us, we are celebrating love. When Jesus came into our world as a baby, He was the human embodiment of the gift of God's love. When He came as Immanuel, God with Us, He came as God incarnate—He came as love incarnate.

Mary and Joseph: A Love Story

have you ever thought about the story of Mary and Joseph as a love story? I mean, sure, you know the Christmas story. You've probably heard it many, many times before. But think about it: Mary and Joseph, a love story.

Matthew 1:18-25 New International Version (NIV)

Joseph Accepts Jesus as His Son

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about^[a]: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet^[b] did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,^[c] because he will save his people from their sins."

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"^[d] (which means "God with us").

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

A HALLMARK ORIGINAL

Imagine with me and place yourself back in the ancient, dusty days of Israel under the Roman Empire. In a small village called Nazareth lives a carpenter named Joseph. He has noble ancestry; he's distantly related to King David himself, but he lives a humble life working with his hands as a tradesman. He probably learned to build things from his father, who was probably a carpenter before him. Some scholars think Joseph grew up in Bethlehem, but at some point moved to Nazareth, about seventy miles north as the crow flies. Maybe this was so he could build his own carpentry business. Maybe he had relatives there. Maybe the town needed a new, good carpenter. We don't know for sure, but we can speculate that Joseph had probably been working long enough to establish himself as an honorable and fairly successful craftsman. That would have made him an eligible bachelor, probably around twenty years old, who was ready to marry and establish his own family.

The younger girls of the village—or more likely their fathers—would have noticed. You have to remember that the Jewish marriage customs of the day were quite different from ours. They followed clearly defined legal guidelines and took place in three stages: the contract, the consummation, and the celebration. Or the Betrothal and the Wedding First, Mary's father would have gone to Joseph to propose and arrange the marriage. A cash price, like a dowry, would be set that Joseph would pay to Mary's family, maybe along with some gifts, and a contract, called a *ketubah*, would be signed. And at that point, Joseph and Mary were married 100 percent. He was her husband. She was his wife.

Then the couple would get to know each other, more like the dating stage we're used to—minus the dinner-and-a-movie outings. Mary would still live with

her family, and at some point in the future—maybe a year, maybe years, depending on the bride’s age or other factors—Joseph would lead a procession of his friends to Mary’s house, where she would be waiting with a group of her friends. Then while everyone waited in the house, the couple would consummate their marriage. This stage two of the marriage was called the *chuppah*. And then everyone would go together and have a marriage feast to celebrate the final stage of the process.

Very different from what we’re used to. And it probably sounds quite awkward to most of us in our day. You’re also probably thinking, *How unromantic!*

Maybe it was. But not so fast. Just because the culture and traditions of those ancient days looked different doesn’t mean that there wasn’t deep love flowing between this historic couple—and possibly even romance.

Use your imaginations with me—the Bible doesn’t fill in all these details, but maybe Mary and Joseph’s story went a little like this...

And with each day that passed, this young couple learned more about each other: what made each other laugh, how they handled challenges and hard days, the strengths of their personalities that shone and the imperfections where they failed, their hopes and fears and dreams for the future, how many children they hoped to have one day, what kind of home Joseph could one day build for his wife and family, how they longed for the day to come when the time was right to consummate their marriage. Each day that passed, Mary and Joseph chose love, and that love continued to deepen and grow.

So imagine the emotional bombshell that went off when Joseph heard the news. *How could you, Mary?! How could you do this, to me, to us? I thought*

you loved me—like I love you. We were doing this the right way, honoring God and our families and each other and now . . . now . . . THIS!

This was the broken trust that Joseph would have felt when Mary came and told him the news. “Joseph, I know this sounds crazy, but an angel visited me and told me I’m going to have a baby. And the angel said His name will be Jesus, and ‘He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.’ He’s the Messiah, Joseph! You have to believe me. It’s a miracle, but it’s true because . . . because . . . I’m pregnant.”

Maybe he tried to listen to those first words—an angel, a miracle, the Messiah—but all he must have felt was the weight of the word *pregnant*. Everybody knows there is only one way to get pregnant, and Joseph knew he had not been involved. Everyone would have known he had not been involved—unless he dishonored Mary and her family and all he held to be true. And if he had, then he too would be a disgrace to all their society.

This was all too much for Joseph. Maybe he walked away in silence, broken and speechless. Maybe he shouted and stormed and sent Mary away in tears. Things did not go smoothly.

And maybe this was part of why Mary went to spend three months with her aunt Elizabeth, away from her own village in the hill country of Judea. It would buy time for Mary’s family to figure out what to do—how would people ever believe this story from Mary? Could they even believe it? Maybe it would give Joseph time to accept it.

So the lovers parted, with pain and anger and distrust swirling in and around them, and young Mary was clinging desperately to the encouraging words of an angel and a knowledge deep in her soul that for whatever reason,

no matter how incredulous it sounded and how miraculous it was, God's very Son had sprung to life within her. Somehow God would make a way.

Isn't that just the kind of crisis that threatens to destroy any good love story? Now, the exact circumstances are different from what you or I will ever face, but the feelings and emotions and relational challenges are no different at their core. Mary and Joseph's is a true human love story, but it is also a supernatural love story that involves you and me and every human who has walked or will ever walk this earth. Let's dig deeper into this point and look at how it affects you and me—and how we can experience this supernatural love of God with Us through the Advent season and beyond.

God's Love Is Supernatural

Luke 1:26-38 New International Version (NIV)

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called^[a] the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and

she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail.”

³⁸ “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.

If we were watching a movie of Mary and Joseph’s love story, this would be where we pan back, drifting out of that drab and dusty Galilean village, seeing a wider and wider vision above the ancient landscape and the geographic forms we recognize as continents and oceans, and farther above the great blue ball of Earth, and still farther beyond the solar system and Milky Way Galaxy, and somehow wider still through the limits of the universe and space and light and time themselves until finally somewhere beyond the limits of physics that bind our creation there is only a presence, a supernatural, infinite presence that is love. There is only God, somehow over and within all things and present and moving within all time, including the entire history of humanity that appears as only a tiny blip.

The apostle John said it most simply and best: God is love. He wrote in 1 John 4:16, “So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (ESV).

This is the nature of our God. Love in its purest form.

Love was there at the center of God’s creative forces that made the universe and formed people in His image to be in relationship with Him. Love was there even when the world fell into sin and rebellion, and despite the catastrophic consequences of humanity’s fall, love was there in shepherding

Adam and Eve and their family into this altered world. Even then love was making a way to restore all that had been lost.

Love forged a covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Love continually led the Israelites through relocation and resettlement, through triumph and imprisonment and exile. As we trace throughout the Old Testament, love guided and corrected and exhorted and showed mercy to the ever-disobedient and easily distracted Israelites.

In Mary and Joseph's story, love was taking the form of humanity in the Messiah Jesus. Love is God with Us. And love would be with Mary and Joseph to care for them and provide everything they would need.

But this love was not natural... It was supernatural, unimaginable, unthinkable, incomprehensible. No earthly force could create it or sustain it. This is the love of God.

God's Love Is Unconditional

Mary's journey to her cousin Elizabeth's house couldn't have been easy. The walk would have been long and hot. The road must have been lonely, and the miles must have echoed in her brain with the recent conversations: the pain and hurt in Joseph's eyes and words, the disbelief and confusion from her family, and always the hope and promise delivered by the angel. She knew the truth, but how would everyone else see? What was going to happen to her?

But as soon as Mary arrived, she was greeted with love. "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!" Elizabeth exclaimed. "But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for

joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!" (Luke 1:42–45).

Can you imagine the relief? Immediately Elizabeth, who was carrying her own miracle child, knew and confirmed to Mary that love was here, that God was here, and that everything was going to be all right.

Mary's response was overwhelming. She said, maybe sang, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant" (Luke 1:46–48).

God's Love Is A Choice

In Joseph's case, his needs were a little different. Back in Nazareth in his pain and confusion, Joseph decided he was going to divorce Mary. The pain was too much. He couldn't believe this was happening. And while legally he could have taken Mary to the courts and had her tried and potentially stoned to death, he still loved her. He couldn't do that, but he couldn't handle this breach of trust. And the law allowed him to divorce her quietly and to try not to make a public disgrace of her.

That's when, in this supernatural love story, God knew that Joseph needed some supernatural love. So Joseph, too, got a visit from an angel with this message: "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20–21).

Notice how God knew exactly what was at the heart of Joseph's hurt: fear. And God gave Joseph the reassurance he needed to trust Mary and her love—and ultimately to trust God and His love to make a way in their amazing,

unbelievable, dangerous, supernatural, and ultimately triumphant love story that was looking like nothing either one of them could have ever imagined.

Joseph chose love and trust, even though the law told him he could do otherwise. And it's a beautiful reflection of God's own choice to love and foster relationship with us. Even though our sin means death and separation from the holy, perfect God, in His nature of pure love, He chose us—even at the terrible price of His Son's life. John 3:16 tells us that it was because of love that God sent Jesus to earth to give His life for us.

The love of God with Us is God's perfect love in human form that we celebrate. And this is the love that knows exactly what we need, no matter what we are facing in this season. Whether it's support from or restoration to another person or whether it's an encounter with the God of the miraculous that you need, God's love is with us. It is here for you. And it is making a way to accomplish God's work in your life.

As mind-blowing as it is, God's love is eternal. It's as never-ending as God Himself. It was. It is now. It will be. And He will never stop demonstrating His love in tangible ways that are both daily occurrences and history-changing events like Christ's birth.

This is the love that God with Us lived out before us, and He will hold us forever and ever and ever, just as the hopeful words of Paul in Romans 8:38–39 remind us: "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

God's Love Can Flow Through Us

Oh, the inside knowledge Mary and Joseph shared. The conversations they must have had and the questions they must have discussed. "Why us?" must have always been at the top of their list. But from the beginning, they recognized that Jesus, their son, was so much more. His life existed for us all. He was God with Us. His love was offered to the world.

And with this knowledge, they chose to live with open hands, trusting in and living out the miraculous love that had been given to them.

In this Advent season, we have the opportunity to reflect on how we can do the same.

Jesus taught, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34–35).

The ability to do so begins as we open ourselves to God's love. It then grows and overflows as we extend kindness and care and support to others around us. Sometimes it takes a small step. Sometimes it requires a bigger leap. But through it all, we can trust and know that it is love that holds us. Because God is with us, love is with us. It is an eternal, vast, and powerful love—yet at the same time a gentle, tender, and personal love. And it is love that will make a way, no matter what we are facing in this season or in the days ahead.

Benediction

"And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." — Ephesians 3:17–19