



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

Advent Week 3
Joining and Sharing
God's Exponential Love

Luke 2.8–20

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So this Advent we have been talking about Exponential Love... On the First Sunday in Advent Pastor Greg discussed the nature of Exponential Growth. He told the story of an emperor being tricked out of all of the rice in the kingdom by first starting with just one grain of rice and then doubling it for every square on the chessboard...soon the numbers were astronomical.

Last week we talked about the limitations, the blockages we often have in acknowledging and receiving the love of God. How there are internal and external factors to our receptiveness and willingness to accept this freely given love. Perhaps we question our worthiness or feel guilt or shame in the presence and acceptance of that love.

Today, I would like to explore more about the sharing and participating in God's love. All of us are familiar with some version of the Christmas story, or really, stories as we have discussed how there are different narratives in different Gospels. Even if there was never a classic snapshot "Nativity Moment" where Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus were huddled in some sort of open-faced wooden shed, flanked by farm animals, shepherds, angels and three wiseman. But, even if it didn't happen exactly that way, that should not minimize the wonder and beauty and truth of the Christmas story. The Christmas story is about the incarnation, it is about God joining humanity in Jesus. And the Christmas story continues to be about the way that we join God in bringing about love into this world.

We all have a role to play in helping to bring about the exponential growth of God's love. We have already seen how Mary embraced this responsibility and rejoiced in the Magnificat "My soul magnifies the Lord" despite knowing how difficult the circumstances of her situation would appear to onlookers. Most of the birth narrative stories we find in scripture are about individuals who, despite challenging, frightening or confusing circumstances respond willingly, even enthusiastically to God's invitation. Today, I want to continue with

2 chapter 2 of Luke. This chapter includes the famous announcement of Jesus' birth to the shepherds....

⁸And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

¹³Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

¹⁶So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

So again, here, like Mary and others we see the willingness of the shepherds to go along with God's plan despite all the uncertainty that surrounds them. There is a lot we could unpack here...Why shepherds? Why is the Son of God announced to a group of lowly outcasts and outsiders? These were not individuals who were simply working their 8 hour shift, looking forward to returning home to their families, a hot meal and a warm bed, the text says they were "living in the fields." Shepherds' lives were lived on the margins. The very

fact that God has chosen to be first revealed to these downcast and outsiders speaks volumes about who Jesus was coming into this world for. This announcement was not to the wealthy and powerful; it did not come to the political leaders or priests; it didn't happen in Jerusalem or even downtown Bethlehem...the first and, by this biblical account, only, people told by any angels of Jesus that night were shepherds. But they took their job seriously and they acted enthusiastically, we read they "hurried off" some translations say they went "with haste"...with haste they went. Now it is reasonable to think that there may have been some hesitation, perhaps a "are you seeing what I am seeing" kind of moment between the shepherds, but the scripture simply alludes to the fact that they look at each other and say "Let's go." In fairness there are two ways of looking at this. On one hand, it's somewhat easy to say well if I saw a whole host of angels singing and telling me to do something you better believe I would get on that immediately. That is what I would like to think that I would do... But... They could have seen this other worldly display of lights and angels and sounds and in the fear and confusion been like "Nope" don't want anything to with that, ain't nobody gonna pay me enough money to go there... they could have acted out of fear or concern. It was reasonable for them to think that if they did show up in Bethlehem saying what they had seen people would laugh and belittle these already outcasted and marginalized people. There was real risk in trusting this command, not to mention the very real financial risk of abandoning a flock... Despite the presence of sheep in many nativity scenes to go "with haste" probably meant not taking the time to herd their flock along with them or find an appropriate sheep sitter to watch over them when they left. But... They had faith, trust in this message from God and a willingness to act on it.

The shepherds went because they were called. They were open to receiving the gift of this good news...and then? They trusted in this message, they were willing to participate, they were willing to get on board with the program, they acted, with haste. They did their part to share and grow this

4 message. We read that after they had been with Mary, Joseph and Jesus “they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.” And what do you think people who are “amazed” do with news that they hear? They too, would have shared... This was the beginning of the rumors about the birth of Jesus, the very start of the story. The shepherds got it started because they were willing to trust and to act. Here we are over 2,000 years later still talking about it, that does not happen without people willingly accepting the gift and sharing it with others.

So what? We may all be thinking, I too, would probably spread a message if a host of angels descended on my work place and told me to go to the next town over. I mean at the very least I would probably post to my Facebook page.... But you see we are being called, we are always being called to participate in the spreading of exponential love. Not just at Christmas time but at all times. There is a long history of being called as a people to be a blessing to others. Going back to Abraham in his covenant with God, he is told that from just his small family, his descendants would grow exponentially, so much so that they would be more numerous than the stars. God’s promise to Abraham was that he would be blessed to be a blessing. Receiving God’s love and then, trusting, acting and passing it on, exponentially.

Later in Luke we find these two short, but popular parables about the exponential nature of the kingdom of God. In Luke 13 we learn the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. Now, when I was younger, I understood this as the mustard seed is a tiny seed and yet it can grow into a large plant, even a tree. But that’s all seeds right? Same could be said for an apple or pomegranate seed that grows into a tree. But the thing about mustard is that it is more like a wild bush that spreads and grows fast, with haste. The kingdom of God can be like that, spreading like a weed, mustard was an invasive plant many hearers in Jesus time would have been familiar with, able to take hold and grow in a wide variety of soils and growing and

spreading fast. A small seed that can grow and spread exponentially.

The next verses in Luke describe the kingdom of God like yeast. "It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." Yeast, just a small amount can be added to bread with dramatic effects. Yeast causes a chemical reaction in the dough which causes it to rise making the dough exponentially bigger than the size of the yeast that was added. This verse is talking about a lot of flour. The translation likely gets lost on us, but 3 measures of flour would be about 144 cups of flour, enough to make over 50 loaves of bread. The fact that just a little yeast can change that much bread is a dramatic example.

This is the type of kingdom we are called to participate in. We are to trust in the wild spreading and yeast rising nature of God's love. When we accept the gift of God's love in us and in this world, we are able to help it radically transform the world around us. It can spread quickly and it can have an outsized impact.

I don't know about you, but when I encounter the kindness of someone else, it fills me with joy and hope and encourages me to want to pass it on as well. I remember once driving home from the beach and when I pulled up to the toll booth I was told the standard \$1 toll I was prepared to pay was already paid for by the car who had gone through before me. It may have just been one dollar, but I was truly moved by that simple act. That \$1 was worth more than 100 cents worth of joy that it brought to me. And now, knowing how good that made me feel, I try to do the same thing for the car behind me when I pass through a \$1 toll booth.

Another example is that last month, Annville Church of the Brethren assembled disaster relief buckets for Church World Service and then challenged our congregation, McPherson and Ephrata to assemble buckets as well. We have accepted that challenge and when we start to assemble our own buckets after the new year, we too, will then challenge other congregations as well. In this way, hopefully the #250bucket

6 challenge will lead to many more buckets for Church World Service.

So what can you do to join and share the exponential love of God? It starts with us trusting in its power, truly believing that love is the greatest force in the world. And it spreads with our conviction to take action. When we join God's love in this world, we participate in its life-giving transformation.

It is in the Christmas season that we are reminded about the presence of Christ, the indwelling of Jesus in this world. The incarnation of God, the light of life and love brought into a dark world.

It sure does feel like a dark world sometimes.... It is easy to be swept up in the pessimism of the destruction we are causing to the environment and to one another. There is great division in our politics and even in our church denomination and district. But it is also not entirely new, we can read about conflict and suffering in history books and in scripture. We are reminded that this is the world Jesus was born into, at the time of the year that is darkest we choose to celebrate his light.

We were not created in the image of God to simply throw up our hands in despair, or remain on the hillside, scared, with our flocks of sheep. We are not called as followers of Jesus to accept the darkness...We are called to light lights, small candles sometimes at first but they turn into a sea of other candles, glowing bright. We are not content to let those around us suffer, we dig in and help out...and when there is nothing more we can do, we surround those who are suffering with love, and embrace their suffering alongside them, just like Jesus. As followers of Jesus we don't seek or tolerate the humiliation of others, or act with pride and arrogance, we wash feet.

These things are not always easy to do, especially in a world that says, *you are not enough*. Or lies to us saying *there is not enough for everyone*, that you need to put down others to get ahead, as long as in the end you win, it does not matter what happens to others along the way, that violence is the best

solution to conflict and revenge is the same thing as justice... This is the framework of the world that Jesus was born into 2,000 years ago. These are the systems that we still must confront every day. We can choose to live that way, take the easy way out, continue to play by the rules of the world or we can choose to be receptive and accept the love of God, trust in its exponential power and take action to bring about the fullness of God's love in this world.

I'd like to close with some thoughts from 13th century Theologian Meister Eckert that I came across this past semester in a seminary class. I like this excerpt because while it is over 700 years old it still challenges us to think about our own role in the Christmas story, about how we are called to action even now, long after the birth of Jesus.

"We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly, but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son, if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? This, then, is the fullness of time: When the Son of Man is begotten in us."

So I challenge us in this season of advent to receive the Gift of Love, the gift of Jesus and to participate in bringing forth this incarnation within ourselves so that love might grow exponentially into the world around us. May we go in peace, in love and with haste.

