



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*Time to Wake Up!
to True Love...The Power of
True Love*

Matthew 1:18–25

By Pastor Pam Reist

Message from December 22, 2019

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¹⁸Now 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.

The fourth Sunday in Advent—some of us are left scratching our heads and asking how we got here so quickly. For others, it can't come soon enough! Either way—here we are...only two days away from our almost magical candle lighting as we raise our lights and sing *Joy to the World, the Lord is come!*

During Advent, among other things, we have considered two things each week...

#1. Our Advent theme throughout has been *Time to Wake Up!* We were reminded that we live in what can be a dark world, and we are invited to wake up to the true light.

#2. And we heard again that Advent is not intended to be a pre-game warm-up for Christmas. The word "Advent" is derived from the Latin word *adventus*, meaning "coming," Advent is a time of preparation for the coming arrival of God Incarnate, Emmanuel. Historically it's been a time of penance, prayer, and fasting to prepare for this coming celebration of Christmas. Advent is to Christmas much like Lent is to Easter. There is wisdom in postponing the cookies and carols and cards until we've had time to fully prepare for the significance

2 of God with us. (I can't believe I'm saying that—I'm the first one to listen to Christmas music.)

And so we have been careful these four Sundays to try to take the time to prepare this season. The first week we looked specifically at true peace as we live in the light of God, turning swords into plough shares. Week 2 was about true hope—hope based not on wishing, but on what we deeply hope God can do, with us. Last week we looked at true joy—not found in stuff but in God, in community and in ourselves. This morning...it's all about love....the power of true love.

INTRO—WEDDING

For me, one of the best parts of ordained ministry is officiating a wedding. We meet with a couple about four times beforehand and use a guide for a number of topics that are important to talk about. We are able to speak and listen frankly and get to know one another. And of course, there's the wedding to plan. Early in my career, at the rehearsal the day before a wedding, the couple suggested I might want to emulate a priest in their favorite movie. I hadn't heard of *The Princess Bride*, but you can bet I watched it, in an effort to better hone my officiating skills. See what you think.

I couldn't pull off the mutton chops. But it did surprise that couple that the next day I began the ceremony with "Marriage...is what brings us together today...the words but not the accent. For those who haven't yet seen the movie—the major theme is LOVE! In fact, love totally drives the action of the whole story. It's based on the deep love between Buttercup (the bride at the altar) and Westley, the farmhand and who, incidentally is not the groom standing next to her. That's Prince Humperdinck, who was smitten by the lovely Buttercup and was forcing her to marry him. And just outside the chapel, in the darkness, Westley and crew were ready to stop the wedding at all expenses. So we have love...a forced love...not a true love...and we have a dark world, with violence and chaos beyond the walls of the castle.

Real life can be like that. There is darkness. It has been a tough year, as we have experienced division and exclusion at many

levels. All is not well when the threat of gun violence in school makes our children fearful, when people go hungry with no roof over their head to keep them dry and warm, without benefits of basic medical care. And the environment is suffering—each day we watch as species disappear from this planet and the water levels rise, threatening the well-being of those who live in the margins.

And on a personal level, we all have experienced upheavals and at times carry the weight of relational fractures, financial pressures, physical illnesses, and the frustrations of life out-of-control. And at the very least, this time of year is a time of tremendous expectations—and sometimes a way in which shopping and cleaning and cooking and wrapping and card addressing and visiting can drain us more than fill us. We expect a picture-perfect Christmas. Expectations can be exhausting. And we're not feeling the love like we think we should.

And we turn to scripture, to a very familiar story, to see if we can find some new meaning, new inspiration and what light it can shed as we think about the power of true love.

This scripture serves to remind us that the preparations for the first Christmas were anything but conventional and were far from proper. There had to be extreme turmoil in the holy family. Think for a moment about the distress that must have consumed both Joseph and Mary, and her whole family, upon learning that Mary was pregnant.

Engagement meant something different in those days—the bond between Mary and Joseph at this time was contractual, not merely social, like our understanding of what it means to be engaged today. The ancient world was immensely serious about betrothal—legally a couple was considered bound to one another and there was no way to easily unbind. While they had not yet moved in together or consummated their union, they were, for all intents and purposes, married. And according to the Hebrew scriptures, a pregnancy at this time was considered adultery, a crime punishable by death for the woman, most likely death by stoning.

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By the time of Jesus' birth, it appears that some of the religious requirements surrounding infidelity may have eased up, and punishment by death was most likely replaced by a formal, public renunciation of the woman—a ritual that would have shamed and shunned her and her family for life. The implications for Mary were clear.

And then...there's Joseph. We don't know a lot about Joseph, who is thought to have died by the time Jesus began his public ministry. In scripture, Jesus is referred to as "the carpenter's son" on at least one occasion so it seems that somebody looked at Jesus, and recognized something of Joseph. We do know something about Joseph's character. When Mary is found to be pregnant, Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. Even before the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, Joseph did something unexpected and unconventional. He resolved to bend the rules and what he did flew in the face of the expectations of that day. As he resolved to stand aside quietly and to leave Mary and her family with their dignity intact, Joseph followed the pull of something else. He heard the call of something deeply counter-cultural for a man in his situation. And here is the remarkable thing—for someone about whom we know so little, Joseph had the wisdom, the courage, the boldness to follow that call. Joseph didn't know that Christmas was just around the corner. But I think that he did hear the call of Advent. He heard its quiet, insistent longing for light to shine into the dark corners of the world. A world where love dares to speak its name. A world in which the greatest power is true love. True love in the form of Emmanuel—God is with us. The love that Jesus taught—the love he stood for—the love he was killed for—was just that kind of non-abandoning, instinctive, sheltering, protecting, guiding love—that kind of patient, quiet, healing love. That's the love of Jesus, and the love of his father Joseph. And that's the love of God. That is the power of true love.

Joseph didn't send Mary away, full of shame. They married, made their home and family...and the rest is history. For

Joseph, to hear the call of God's love was the dawn of a distinctly countercultural vision.

If, as we said, Advent is about waiting, it calls us to let that true love of God to free our souls, like Joseph's, to envision the shadowy outline of a new world that is just beginning to dawn.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said "We must discover the power of true love, the redemptive power of true love. And when we do that, we will make of this old world a new world, for love is the only way."

Advent calls us to remember the love of Jesus and Joseph and the love of God. It calls us to let God's true love gradually take root deep in our being, freeing us for new expectations and the birth of something within us and for us: the arrival of Emmanuel—God is with us.

God comes to us as we are, not as we should be or are trying to be, or have promised to be, or someday will be. God comes to us as we are, today, this moment. And that, I believe is the promise at the heart of Joseph's story: God came to Joseph and Mary at the birth of Christ. And, in a similar way, God also comes to us, in and through Jesus.

John Pavlovitz is an author, pastor, blogger and activist. We hope to engage him here in the months to come, so stay tuned.

In the Advent devotional that he wrote for this season, he says something like:

"...I simply want my presence on this earth to result in less pain, less inequality, less poverty, less suffering and less damage for those sharing it with me. I want the sum total of my minutes and my efforts to yield more compassion, more decency, more laughter, more justice, and more goodness. In other words, I just want to do Love right."

Emmanuel, God with us. God is really with us and we can do Love right.

I had the delight and honor of hearing Episcopal Bishop Michael Curry preach in Washington DC at a conference I

6 was attending. Later that summer he was also the guest preacher at the Royal British wedding, where he wowed the world with a message of love—true love.

I'd like to share a few of his thoughts in that message, with my own spin:

Imagine this tired old world where true love is the way.

When true love is the way, no child will go to bed hungry...ever again.

When true love is the way, poverty will become history.

When true love is the way, the whole earth will be a sanctuary.

When true love is the way, we will lay down our swords, down by the riverside.

When true love is the way, we will treat each other kindly, and with respect.

When true love is the way, we know that God is creator of all, and we are brothers and sisters, God's family. That's a new human family, a new heaven, a new earth, a new world.

The power of true love—stronger than any darkness or power.

Yes! This is Emmanuel, this is God is with us! This is true love in flesh and blood. Let every heart prepare him room. Come, Lord Jesus. Come! Amen.

¹Low: *An Honest Advent Devotional*, John Pavlovitz. Chalice Press, pg. 48–49.

