

I'll Be Home for Christmas

Message #4 in the series "I'll Be Home for Christmas"

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown
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It is good to be with you in worship today, we are in the middle of a message series that we're concluding today called I'll Be Home for Christmas. And in this final installment of this message today, we're going to look and see what the Christmas story in 2021 can tell us about what it means to be in fellowship with Christ. Before we do, I'd like to just open with a brief word of prayer. Let's now go before the Lord and prepare our hearts for His message today.

Well, gracious, God, we thank You for Your word. We thank You for the power that it has in our lives. That we can look at texts that were written so many years ago in different languages, translated into English and languages all around the world that can instruct us so much about what we can see in our lives today. But we ask that You clear a space in our hearts for Your message today. That Your Holy Spirit come and fill those places so that we can hear from You. Lord, I have absolutely nothing to say. You have everything to say. Amen.

Well, I have just a quick question to start as we jump in this morning. Did you open all your presents yet? Did you get anything that you didn't expect? Any unexpected gifts? One of my most unexpected gifts was from my daughter and it was this tie. I'm just going to put that on right now. There we go. Another unexpected gift that I received was this pen from my son, which I think is a really cool, unexpected gift. The tie reminds me that we need to be reminded of Christmas, no matter what time of year it is. And this pen kind of reminds me that every time I write something down, whether it's a to do list in my journal or a check, I'm reminded of my family and everything that they mean to me. Unexpected gifts, unexpected gifts. Of course, we know that Jesus is the reason for the season at Christmas time, but we exchange gifts as a reminder of the presence that He has in our lives, as if we're sharing parts of ourselves with other people. Unexpected gifts.

Well, on this day after Christmas, this Boxing Day, as I mentioned, we're concluding a sermon series that we're calling I'll Be Home for Christmas, where we've been focusing on the life of Joseph, Jesus's adopted father. Now, this sometimes-silent character in the traditional nativity scene turns out plays an important role in the Christmas story. He doesn't have a lot of lines, but he's a man of principle, he's a man of faithfulness and he took on a tremendous responsibility. And I think that through the last several weeks, have you been tracking with this? And hopefully, as you see today, Joseph's life frames an important story for us as we look at Christmas in 2021, some 2000 and some change years later. Now previous messages, we've explored how God adopted Joseph to be Jesus's father, just as God adopts us to a greater calling and purpose.

You see, in Joseph's case, and perhaps in ours too, this was an unexpected adoption. Joseph, by all accounts, was just a normal, ordinary handyman who did a very ordinary thing, a very normal thing, he went out and found a wife named Mary, but just as they were starting their life together, just as they were becoming engaged, something very unexpected happens. And Mary and Joseph are thrown into a period of chaos when everything that they'd planned was disrupted by a divine message, a miraculous pregnancy, a child who would change the entire world. The image that still sits with me, as I think about this story, about two young kids about to get married, get this very chaotic message and news just as they're probably trying to figure out what all this might mean, this all be so very strange to them, an Angel of the Lord visits both on different occasions and says this message, "Do not be afraid."

Well, I've tried to imagine what it must have felt like for Joseph and Mary in the beginning of the biblical Christmas story from moment to moment when they heard this initial message of what was going to be happening to them, they probably lived through periods of absolute peace and then complete and total panic. From day to day, it might have been like that for them as they swung dramatically between those two sets of emotions, not completely understanding what was happening to them. You see, they didn't have 2000 years of context like you and me. They didn't have Jesus yet to put that piece of the puzzle together. It all would have been difficult to navigate. It would have been all very confusing as these emotions of panic would have swelled and maybe sometimes swelled over depending on the day and how they were feeling. And maybe just maybe when the tension was getting too much to bear during those very confusing nine to 10 months, maybe they heard that voice of God telling them, "Do not be afraid."

Fear is a truly troubling set of emotions sometimes. It has a way of clouding our thoughts, doesn't it? It has a way of flooding our hearts and our minds filling in the small, unoccupied places that we have forgotten about. Left unchecked, fear can lay waste to our greatest dreams. It can cut us off at the knees, and we can forget all about any sense of purpose or direction or momentum. It can absolutely paralyze us. Recently, in the last year, 2021 was a big year in the last year I experienced, I had something of a serious medical question come up through an ordinary test. Now everything turned out OK, but for 30 days, 30 long days, I experienced absolute fear. I had periods of time where my irrational brain would just outpace my rational brain, and I began to get paranoid, and I began thinking things that I wasn't prepared to think. I've been captured by absolute fear. And what I noticed as I look back on that when I was really, afraid, I noticed there was no room for patience. There was no room for peace. And I think I'd probably lost all sight in those brief moments when I was afraid, I lost all sight of love.

Here's the thing in this story that we're talking about in the story of Joseph, in the story of Christmas, this one pivotal episode in the Bible and in fact in the entire history of the world, you see, Joseph and Mary weren't adopted out of fear. They were adopted by God out of love. Their fear, if it was present, didn't last very long. You see, when caught in cycles between peace and panic, God comes down to tell Mary and Joseph, "do not be afraid." If, like Joseph and Mary, we find ourselves in a period of unexpected circumstances, and let's be honest, who doesn't find themselves in unexpected circumstances these days? Maybe, just maybe the Christmas story in 2021 tells us, "Do not be afraid" because you are here, you have been adopted for love.

In many places throughout the Bible, love is placed at the opposite end of fear as almost like an opposing force. There are several examples specifically in the New Testament, when people were experiencing rapid change throughout their lives, especially in the letters that the Apostles writes in the New Testament. For instance, the Apostle Paul is writing to the Colossians, which was a brand-new church, there was a lot of fear and uncertainty surrounding these cultures, where they were leaning into new ideas and believing that Jesus was the son of God and that their sins could be forgiven, but here's the problem the Colossians, like most churches, didn't always agree with one another. And they were afraid for their future. In his letter to the Colossians, the Apostle Paul says, "and over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." In times of uncertainty, the Apostle Paul is encouraging us to put on love not fear, not conspiracy theories, not uncertainty, but love.

In another letter to Timothy the Apostle, Paul talks to Timothy, who is a young protege of sorts. He's taking on new responsibilities and Paul is pouring in every ounce of wisdom that he can into his letters to Timothy and in 2 Timothy, the second letter he speaks to this young leader and says, "For the spirit of God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline." So, we get a sense that the love that we can put on, the love that can empower and embolden us comes from the love of God. Now, maybe the greatest example of love that we can find in the Bible, of course, is Jesus and the most memorable memory verse of all times. Of course, going all the way back to our times in Sunday school, if you are grown up in the church, this is probably one of the first things that you're taught is John 3:16. It's the rallying cry of Christians everywhere in times of uncertainty because we can be certain of this,

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life." [John 3:16 NIV]

Love. Opposite of fear. You see, in these three examples, love is set opposite of fear, and that is indicating perhaps that a root of many of our fears is this absence, or at least maybe a deficit of love in our lives. And yet another example in 1 John 4, John says, "there is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear." This comes from a segment of scripture, by the way, in an epistle that John wrote much later in his life while in captivity, he's writing this letter to new Christians all over the place and as he's trying to communicate in this one section of scripture that's later been titled God's Love and Ours. The word love is used 27 times. Twenty-seven times. If you read it, it's almost a confusing set of scriptures to read because the word love is used repeatedly, you have a hard time following what it is he's talking about. You got to kind of slow it down and read it line for line if you do. This comes from 1 John 4, be ready, every line packs a tremendous punch, explaining that the love of God is powerful. It is enduring and in it fear has no place to take hold. There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out all fear. In this passage, John takes on the love/fear dynamic and removes any doubt that we may have stated simply and finally, there is no fear in love.

Well, I have a set of concordances that was required for me to purchase for licensing school a couple of years ago and when I accepted a call to ministry and I was really challenged by this section of scripture in 1 John, I found that in the concordances there's

actually a number of essays written from people who have worked in theological seminaries for decades and these essays were really interesting. In every single one that I read, the essayists attempt to take on this fear and love dynamic and a couple of dissertations from those essays that I read and pardon me for going down this rabbit hole, but I think you're going to find this helpful, is one of the things is that fear is a self-centered mindset. Fear is a self-centered mindset. Now, I know that self-centeredness often has a bad rap, right? It's the thing that your parents might tell you when you're being selfish or not thinking about others, but when it comes to fear, self-centeredness is actually most times a good thing because fear focuses on the self and what will keep the self, the individual, us safe. Yeah, fear is the self-centered mindset that stops us from walking too close to the edge of the Grand Canyon. It's the self-centeredness that perhaps, you know, invites us to slow down a little bit on highway 283, some of us anyway. In those cases, fear is trying to keep us safe. But here's the thing, left unchecked, fear can grow to a place of paralysis. It can be dangerous to ourselves and potentially to others too. If we allow fear to grow, it can lead to dangerous levels of isolation and resentment.

The essayists getting kind of distilling these different ideas down into a single thought put love on another end of the spectrum, love, on the other hand, is self-denial. If fear is self-centered, love is self-denial. Love casts out all fear because it casts out those unhealthy levels of self-consciousness. You see, it organizes personal interactions and intersections on a higher level. Those of you who are married or who are parents or otherwise connected strongly to another individual, know exactly what I'm talking about here. You know that for that other person because you love them so much on a completely indescribable level in plane that you would absolutely step into oncoming traffic for them to stop a bus from hitting them. That is the exact opposite of that self-centered fear that we were talking about just a moment ago. Love is self-denial. The greatest example that we have of love being an act of self-denial, of course, is Jesus, who died on a cross for our sins. It is through love that we more readily connect to God, and we more readily connect to other people, to other groups, to other populations. Love casts out all fears.

If love is not present in our personal contexts. This gives way to suspicion. It gives way to duplicity. It gives way to hatred and racism and aggravation. It's all related to fear. Fear of the unknown, of the unfamiliar, the unsafe. Most of the tension that we could be experiencing in our culture today is likely and largely, as the essayists would say and maybe as your pastor, I would say it too, is because we have a lack of love. Where love is presence, where it is expressed in imaginative ways, where sympathy, fair mindedness and goodwill are found, fear is almost completely absent. God did not adopt us for fear. He adopted us for love. Where there is love, fear has no room to move, and it is simply an overpowering force. It cannot take a hold of us. That is, fear cannot take a hold of us because of the overwhelming sense of connection, the overwhelming sense of belonging and the endurance that comes from the very presence of love in our lives. It takes precedent every single time. Our God is love. He is the perfect definition of it and there is no fear in love.

I'd like to zoom in to one example that I think you're going to enjoy. You see after, well, a few years ago, Joe Serna, who is a United States Army veteran in the war against Al

Qaeda in Afghanistan, was arrested and convicted while driving under the influence of alcohol. A condition of his probation following his conviction is that he could not have a single drink of alcohol, not one. However, during a routine spot check by his parole officer, Joe Serna was caught. You see the conditions of his probation were either something that he couldn't follow or would not follow. So as a matter, of course, Joe found himself once again in Judge Lou Oliveira's courtroom, the same judge who had initially convicted him. And now with the setup, you can probably guess things aren't going to go well for Mr. Serna.

Judge Oliveira gave Joe a night in jail because he had to be held accountable. As he entered the cell, he knew it would be one of the longest nights of his life. He started to feel anxiety and a flashback came over him. Joe had done three tours in Afghanistan, has two Purple Hearts, survived an IED and a suicide bomber, but he said his scariest moment was the night he was riding in a truck with three other soldiers. They were following a creek and the road gave way and the vehicle went in. The truck started filling with water. Trapped and unable to move, Joe felt the water rising past his legs, then waist and neck until finally it stopped at his chin. He was the sole survivor. Joe said it still haunts him and he suffers PTSD. Among his issues of fear are being in small, cramped places.

Judge Oliveira knew what Joe was going through. He knew Joe's history and he knew he had to be held accountable. After a few minutes Joe was joined by Judge Oliveira for the entire night. They talked about a lot of things until the walls didn't exist anymore. It helped Joe overcome his PTSD and brought him back to North Carolina from being in a truck in Afghanistan. That night Joe promised the judge no more mess ups. It's not how Law & Order usually works, but sometimes jail is not what a man needs. Sometimes the best sentence is compassion.

What a truly remarkable story. The unexpected gift by a judge that went into a jail cell with a man he's sentenced. The effect of this was nothing short of transformational. You can see it in Joe Serna's life. The fear and anxiety that began to crowd in and literally choke the life out of him, evaporated when a fearless love invaded that small jail cell that night. I'm going to ask you a question, can you imagine being the source of love in someone's life today? Loving others, sharing this very love of God with other people is dreadfully hard work sometimes, and its work that we would often decide not to do because we're afraid. Afraid of rejection. Afraid of an unknown outcome. Yet it's foundational in the practice of the Christian life.

In Matthew 22, Jesus says that "there are two great commandments, the first is to love God with everything that we have." Everything that we have, and the second is like it. "To love our neighbors as we love ourselves." Think about the people in your immediate circle today who, two years later, are isolated and alone. What about that coworker whose desk you pass every single day and due to social distancing, we just walk by without saying hi or give a smile or a word of affirmation? Or when was the last time that you called a distant family member on the phone or sent them a text message? Just that little affirmation that there's someone out there in this great big world that cares for them and knows who they are. What about the person who you don't see seated next to you at church lately? That special someone that you haven't seen in the cafe downstairs

in between service? When was the last time that you engaged with someone that you haven't spoken to in a while for any variety of reasons? You see an ounce of care; a concentrated moment of compassion can light the warming spark of love in someone's heart that can catch on fire and become a burning blaze. We've seen that level of love on a tremendous scale when we see the Christmas story.

In a broken world flooded with sin and fear, a just God looked down and compassion and He saw Mary and He saw Joseph, two young people that He adopted for a tremendously important job. They were going to be Jesus's parents. They would raise the savior of the world. And Jesus like Judge Olivera, He lived with us in our space, He talked to us, He got to know us, and He invited us into the Great Kingdom of God to understand the endless grace, the redemption and love of God, the Father. You see God through Jesus adopted all of us. And He didn't adopt just the squeaky-clean version of ourselves that we aspire to one day, He adopted the broken hearted, the angry, the fearful, the selfish, the broken and addicted versions of ourselves too.

You have been adopted, every single part of you. God's love is boundless and there are no limits to His grace. His redemption never stops. Just when you think you've done that one thing that final straw that would separate you from God forever, He says, look at the manger and look at the cross, no matter what you think you have done, nothing, nothing, nothing will ever separate me from you. God has adopted you, and He's adopted me, and He's adopted everyone throughout all creation, through the grace that we see and the birth, the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, our savior. And it's available to all.

Well, this morning on Boxing Day, you might be saying to yourself, I would love to let the love of God come into my life. And in a quiet moment, you might say, Pastor Matt, you know, I admit I've let something grab a hold of me that has paralyzed me with fear. If that's you, I'd like to just pray a prayer right now. Let's bring this to God, let's lay this at his feet wherever you are, I invite you just to bow your heads, let the spirit of God just invades your heart.

Oh, Heavenly Father, the giver of life, the very name of love. We invite you through your Holy Spirit to invade our hearts, to clear out all fear to make room for your perfect love. Lord, as you do, embolden us to carry forth your love to others so that we may be your ambassadors of love and healing in your world. We know, Lord, that we cannot do it alone. That in this life, in this world of brokenness, a very natural thing called fear sometimes challenges us. Let us be reminded, Lord, that your perfect love drives out of fear. And Lord, with you we have all that we need. You are the great healer, the great Redeemer, the great unifier, and we invite you in today. Amen.