

Christmas Eve Sermon

A Candle of Love

Rev. Dr. Larry Griffin | Page 1 of 4

Isaiah 9:2-7 - The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.

Titus 2:11-14 - For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.

Luke 2:7 - And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Dear Christian Friends,

Not too far away from here is a young woman in prison who knows the darkness of meth addiction, she knows the darkness of a drunken husband attacking her in word and in deed, she knows the darkness of self inflicted wounds that have cost her contact with three of her six children, she knows the darkness of making mistakes that threaten to ruin her life, and yet on her a great light has been shining in recent months. There in prison, she and other women are signing up for Bible study faster than the chaplain can provide them, there in prison, she has been reading from cover to cover a Bible and praise be to God a Lutheran Catechism, there in prison, a pastor was able in recent days to look her in the eyes, to tell her that God loved her, that God has a plan to help her both to survive and to be used in His Church, to direct her to God in heaven above loving her at the manger, loving her at the cross, loving her at the empty tomb, loving her in all the stages of her life, she who has been dwelling in a land of deep darkness, on her a great light is shining tonight.

Three Wednesdays ago, we focused on the candle of hope, two weeks ago a candle of peace, one week ago a candle of joy, tomorrow the Christ candle, and tonight, a candle of love. Tonight we see that the love of God is both predictable and unpredictable at the same time. In three ways, He is both predictable and unpredictable. First, on the one hand we know that God always keeps his promises, but on the other hand we don't know exactly **when**.

Second, on the one hand we know that God will always get done what He says He will get done, but on the other hand, we don't know exactly **how**. Third, on the one hand, we know that God will frequently use ordinary people to carry out His wishes, but on the other hand, we don't know exactly **by whom**.

Our sermon tonight will explore what life looks like when we spend our days loving one another in response to God first loving us. Two lessons we have learned from our mother's knees, and tonight we learn them once again. *Lesson #1 is that God loved us so much He sent His only Son to be our Savior, and Lesson #2 is that if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*

Lesson #1 is that God loved us so much He sent His only Son to be our Savior, or to use Christmas language, unto us a Son has been given, unto us a child has been born. Our appointed lessons for tonight give us two metaphors for God's Christmas love, three results

Christmas Eve Sermon

A Candle of Love

Rev. Dr. Larry Griffin | Page 2 of 4

of God's Christmas love, and answer the three questions of when, how, and whom is God's love delivered.

The first metaphor Isaiah gives for God's love is a great light chasing away the darkness. Not too long ago, I was walking through our house in the middle of the night, trying to be quiet, focused on letting our precious golden doodle Gabby outside to do her business. At which time I stepped on her favorite squeaky toy. At which time Gabby thought I wanted to play, Debi woke up, and my heart rate escalated exponentially. All of which I could have avoided had I turned on a light or two.

Far more dangerous is the darkness that has been spreading over our nation in recent years. In cities big and small church attendance is declining, increasing numbers of folks are keeping Christ at a distance, trying to mind their own business, focused on all kinds of priorities other than the Word of the living God, and stepping into all kinds of trouble.

Dear friends in Christ, the good news of great joy is that no matter how deep or dark is your darkness in these days, God loves you. He loved you at the manger, He loved you at the cross, He loved you in the waters of your Baptism, He loves you as often as you let His Word be a light unto your path and a lamp unto your feet, He loves you in the eating and drinking of your Lord's Supper.

The second metaphor Isaiah gives for God's love is of God multiplying the nation. Isaiah predicted that when the Messiah is born, God would be enlarging the nation, He was referring to the fact that not only would a small number of Jews believe in Jesus as Savior, a multitude of Gentiles would be attracted to the New Testament Church as well. Tonight sanctuaries in cities big and small are swelling more than at any time of the year, praise be to God, in fulfillment of prophecy.

St. Paul, the great missionary to the Gentiles said it this way to Titus, "**For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.**" Dear friends in Christ, not only is tonight the most holy night of the church year, not only is it the most beautiful night of the church year, not only is it the most memorable night of the church year, not only is it the most highly attended night of the church year, it is the night with the greatest potential to for all ages to taste the love of God at the manger and then to step it up in the way we love one another. Tonight the love of God is both predictable and unpredictable at the same time. Predictable in that this candle light service will be remembered for generations to come. Unpredictable in that only God knows the way the Holy Spirit will work in our hearts and give us opportunities to love our neighbors in the days ahead. Which brings us to lesson #2.

Lesson #2 is that if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. Three results of God's Christmas love I offer to you on this holy, this silent, and this life changing night. Three results, three fruits of the Holy Spirit, three evidences of faith inside of us, one each

Christmas Eve Sermon

A Candle of Love

Rev. Dr. Larry Griffin | Page 3 of 4

from the Old Testament lesson (joy), the Epistle Lesson (self-control), and the Gospel lesson (obedience). 1) Exuberant Joy, 2) Self control, 3) Quiet obedience

From the Old Testament lesson tonight, the Holy Spirit would be working in our hearts not just a little bit of joy once in awhile, but a consistent, contagious, distinctively Christian, and even exuberant joy. The prophet Isaiah compares the joy of Christians worshipping God to the joy of farmers bringing in the harvest or the joy of soldiers winning the battle and then dividing the spoil.

Dear friends in Christ, not too far away is a man whose drinking habit has caused all kinds of brokenness in his marriage, and not too far away from him is a woman whose bouts of rage have frightened the very people she loves, and not too far away from her is a teen ager whose heart is weighed down with guilt over recent mistakes, and not too far away from her is an elderly man who missed countless opportunities to be kind and patient with loved ones. But what they all have in common is that they're sincerely sorry, in this very hour they are repenting, they are closing their eyes, they are hearing angels and archangels rejoicing, all is well, all is calm, all is bright.

From the Epistle lesson tonight, the Holy Spirit would be working in our hearts not just a little bit of self-control and godly living once in awhile, but a consistent, contagious, and distinctively Christian practice of self control. This very evening the Spirit of God would be working in our hearts through the preaching of both Law and Gospel. The Law commands us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions, but only the Gospel can motivate us to say no and to actually live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives. The Law can show us our sin, but only the Gospel shows us our Savior. The Law is that mirror which stops us and gets us to realize we are in the wrong place, but only the Gospel can effect change in our hearts, only the Good News of Jesus Christ can provide the reason, the strength, and the will to do what pleases God.

From our Gospel lesson tonight, as we explore Joseph and Mary living out their vocations in marriage and family, the Holy Spirit would be working in our hearts not just a little bit of obedience here and there, but a consistent, contagious, and distinctively Christian living out of our callings at home, at work, in society, and at church.

We don't know much about Joseph before the decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered, but we know the Holy Spirit had been working on his heart, we know that he had been circumcised, we know that he was a descendant of David, we know that in that day marriages were often arranged by spouses parents and were based on economics rather than romance.

When Joseph found out that Mary was with child, as far as he knew Mary had been unfaithful to him and slept with another man. Joseph would have every react in anger and to dismiss the dream as just a dream, but the grace of God had taught him to be self control, the

Christmas Eve Sermon

A Candle of Love

Rev. Dr. Larry Griffin | Page 4 of 4

grace of God had taught him to live out his vocation as husband and father in quiet and faithful fashion. Even though it required him to believe the impossibility of a virgin birth. And so he obeyed in quiet fashion. His life was at the same time predictable and unpredictable. Many days, he no doubt walked by faith, not by sight. By faith, Joseph went up the 85 miles or so with Mary from Nazareth into Bethlehem, he did what the law required, and as often as he did his part in getting his son Jesus on his way in life, on his way to the cross on a little hill outside of Jerusalem, as often as he provided and protected and nurtured his family, that often **all was well, all was calm, all was bright.**

There's a lot we don't know about Mary before the angel Gabriel told her that she had found favor with God, that the Holy Spirit would come upon her, that she would be with child and this child would be the Son of the Most High God. We don't know exactly what she knew and what she didn't know regarding the next 33 years or so of their life together. But what we do know is that the Holy Spirit had worked in her heart a humility and a confidence that God was in ultimate control, it was her assignment to trust in her Lord and lean not unto her own understandings. By faith, Mary went up to Bethlehem with Joseph, by faith, she gave birth to the very Son of God, by faith she wrapped him in swaddling cloths, by faith she treasured the memories of the shepherds and Wise Men visiting, by faith she went all the way to the cross with her Son, by faith she watched her father in heaven pour out on Jesus a wrath against the sins of all generations, as often as she lived out her vocation in faithful fashion as wife and mother, **that often all was well, all was calm, all was bright.**

The kingdom of God is like a beautiful sanctuary jam packed with God's people on Christmas Eve who struggle every day with the very forces of darkness, but on them a great light has shined. They know well not only the story of Christmas, but the companion stories of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. They know that first things come first, and then secondary things come second. They know that true love starts with God, it flows to them and then out and about. God's kindness and patience always comes first, and then their kindness and patience for others comes second. First, their sins are forgiven, then they forgive. First, they are served, then they go looking for others to serve. First, Jesus lives out His vocation as Savior in perfect fashion on their behalf, then they go back to their homes, they go back to their work places, they go to wherever God is asking them to go, and they carefully manage all of their treasures, all of their talents, and all of their time for the glory of God. **And as often as they do, all is well, all is calm, and all is bright.** In Jesus name. Amen