

God So Loved The World

For the past three Sundays, we have reviewed hope, peace and joy. Today's lessons concentrate on Love. Love is defined as a strong affection for another arising out of kinship or personal ties; a warm attachment, enthusiasm or devotion. Today, we commemorate love because "*God [initiated and] so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.*" John 3:16. We celebrate love in that Mary was willing to be the mother of the Incarnate one, a vessel through which God's loving Son was to enter into the world. We cherish love in that God cares for, sustains and holds us, the beloved, in the hallow of his hands.

I. The Love Story Begins in Ancient Prophecy-Micah 5:2-51

The prophet Micah came from Moresheth in Judea and prophesied before the 721 B. C. Fall of Israel. He was a contemporary of Isaiah and Zephaniah. He represented and continues to represent the longing of people all over the world for peace, justice and prosperity. Foreign domination was the order of the day. Assyria was about to destroy the Northern kingdom and scatter her people forever. Kingdoms waged war against kingdoms. Brother exploited, abused and killed brother. And the image of God imprinted upon human beings at creation became twisted, gnarled and perverted. Yet, God still loved and wanted to save the peoples of the world, starting with Israel. What then had to happen in order for the peoples and the nations to be saved?

Micah envisioned a new earth in which God would suddenly come to his people. The wayward would return to the Lord after the birth of a Righteous One in Bethlehem. The Righteous One would then live in the midst the people who upon recognizing him would turn from their wicked ways and return to Lord. He would feed his flocks and the flock would dwell securely with peace on earth, good will toward all human beings. All humans would abide by the Laws of Moses and would worship God and love one another. That constitutes the divine Love and human longing from of old. That is part of the story of the beginning of love, but it is not all.

II. The Love Story Is Perfected-Hebrews 10:5-10

The author of Hebrews saw Jesus as fulfilling and surpassing the Laws of Moses, for all times. In Israel, the sacrificial system had been used as a means of atoning for sins. Just as you might give a gift of a bouquet of flowers or box of candy to a loved one whom you have offended, humans sought to give God an animal or cereal offering to atone for their sins. But the system did not work. As sincere, meaningful, and elaborate as the sacrificial system was, in the final analysis, it could never and can never cover the multitude of human sins and reconcile humans to God. It often failed because the gift was detached from the heart of the giver or the sorrow was not commensurate with the needed forgiveness.

Because the system did not and can not work, the author to the Hebrews contended that system had been replaced by the one self-offered atoning sacrifice of Jesus on the cross at Calvary.

On a city dump outside the walls of Jerusalem, the self offered sacrifice, death and resurrection of Jesus, all blended together into God's loving and gracious gift of forgiveness for the sins of the whole world. It was only in the demonstration of Jesus Christ's submission of his human will, that salvation was made possible, forgiveness completed, reconciliation was achieved and sanctification began.

You then may ask me, "Why is it that many of our public figures still failed and embarrass themselves and us?"

An answer to why we fail, I believe, is that we cannot totally submit our wills to Almighty God through the observance of the Laws of Moses, through any rule of life or even through any practice of piety. We all fail and will continue to fail until the blood of Jesus cleanses our bodies and the Spirit of God completely transforms our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. So in the final analysis, Jesus said it best, when asked who then can be saved, "*With humans, it is impossible, but with God all things are possible.*" Matthew 19:26.

Paul described the process of atonement in this way, "*He (God) abolished the first order (law and sacrifices) in order to establish the second (Obedience to God in Christ Jesus).*" Hebrews 10:9b. Therefore, from the resurrection of Jesus Christ until Christ returns, we are in the process of being perfected toward sanctification, or holiness. *Hebrews records, "And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."* Hebrews 10:10.

The goal of the Laws of Moses was to punish the offender. But the goal of God in Christ Jesus through love is to rescue and save the lost.

III. The Love Story Continues-Luke 1:39-54, 46-55

How did it all take place? The gospel this morning tells us how it all got started. Today, we celebrate Gabriel's announcement to Mary of Nazareth that she would be the bearer of the Christ child to the world. Her subsequent visit to her cousin Elizabeth in the hill country of Judea confirmed and announced that good news. There, as Mary announced the good news to Elizabeth, we learn of the first acknowledgment of Jesus' savior-ship by a stirring of his cousin John in the his mother's womb. "*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.*" Luke 1:43-45.

After Elizabeth had blessed Mary and the fruit of her womb, Mary sang what has come to be known as the Magnificat. If you read and study it closely you will find among other things, Luke 1:46b-56:

- That her soul magnified and her spirit rejoiced in God, her Savior.
- She responded not in arrogance but out of humility.
- Generations to come would consider her to be blessed because of her willingness to say,

“Yes to God.”

- **Through her son Jesus, the Savior, God would show mercy for generations after generations.**
- **God through her has shown his strength, not in the might of kingdoms, but through the love and vulnerability of a tiny baby born in Bethlehem.**
- **Armies would be defeated, thrones would be cast down, weapons would be beaten into plow shares.**
- **The lowly would be raised up, the hungry would be filled, while many of the arrogant and powerful would be left behind.**
- **And God would at last fulfill his promise to his chosen people—a promise made over four thousand years ago through a peasant woman from Nazareth who sang The Magnificat!**

That is the story told in a hill country village of Judea a long, long time ago! This is the story that we must learn and re-learn and incorporate into our daily lives. God so loved the world that he established a new order, the dispensation of which, began in an obscure village, off the beaten track, in a kingdom located at the cross roads of civilization. Therefore, let us each work and pray to do our parts of spreading that love today and forevermore. In the words of the great Charles Wesley, let us pray (Hymn 657):

**Love divine, all love excelling, joy of heaven in earth come down,
fixed in us thy humble dwelling, all thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesus thou art all compassion, pure unbounded love thou art,
visit us with thy salvation, enter every trembling heart.**

**Come, almighty to deliver, let us all thy life receive;
suddenly return, and never, nevermore thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing, serve thee as thy hosts above,
pray, and praise thee without ceasing, glory in thy perfect love.**

**Finish then thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be;
let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee;
changed from glory into glory till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love and peace.**

Amen.