

NATIVITY OF OUR LORD: CHRISTMAS EVE | DECEMBER 24, 2022

ISAIAH 9:2-7 | PSALM 96 | TITUS 2:11-14 | LUKE 2:1-14

What is most remarkable about the birth of Jesus is how unremarkable it was. Or at least, how unremarkable it would have seemed. No celebrities waiting to congratulate the new family. No state-of-the-art crib flown in from Scandinavia. No tabloids speculating about how Mary got pregnant. When Jesus was born, few people took notice. Their attention was elsewhere.

And yet, this child in the manger is not just any child but he is, as the author of Titus tells us, “the glory of our great God.” The glory of God is not the glory of Emperor Augustus or Quirinius. It is not something that can be found in a palace or in a mansion or in the marketplace. Because the glory of God is not money or status, power or prestige. The glory of God, St. Luke tells us, is love. And in this unremarkable place, on an unremarkable night, to unremarkable parents, our world is filled with God’s great love.

God’s love is different from our love. “The love of [people],” Martin Luther once wrote, “comes into being through that which is pleasing to it.” In other words, we love things, people, and experiences that make us feel a certain way. When a dish has that flavor we’ve been craving, we think, “I love it. It reminds me of home.” When we meet a person who makes us feel good, we say, “I love them. They’re great.” And when we hear the catchy hook of a new song, we say, “I love it. I’m going to listen to it until I get sick of it.”

But “the love of God,” Luther went on, “creates that which is pleasing to it.” In other words, God does not love us because we’re lovable. God loves us because God loves. And so even seemingly unremarkable places and unmarkable lives can be the end of God’s love. God loves us because that’s just how God is.

We can never be reminded of that enough, especially on Christmas. At this time of the year, many of us look back on the year that’s been and wonder what we accomplished. Did we get the promotion? Did we have the big family gathering? Did we get into our first choice school? And if we’re feeling a little insecure about how much we’ve accomplished, some of our friends even send us letters telling us about their spouse who just took a grand tour of Europe, their kid who just landed a big promotion, and their dog who just won a MacArthur genius grant.

So we resolve to try harder next year. To live lives that are worthy of our friends’ admiration, our neighbors’ respect, and—why not?—God’s love. And there were no shortage of people in first century Palestine trying to do the same. Strivers and go-getters who lived lives of glory. People who could have given Jesus the world’s best tutors, crib sheets with a 900-thread-count, and an inheritance that would make Jeff Bezos blush. The kinds of people who were, well, remarkable.

And yet the love of God in Jesus is encountered first by people like Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna, Elizabeth and Zechariah, and shepherds whose names we don’t know. And that last one sort of makes the point. That these were unremarkable people. Grafted into the design of God’s great love not because they were interesting or wealthy or devout or had some disposition that God was looking for. But because God loves.

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That is why love is the glory of God. It is a love that can't be cajoled or enticed, controlled or persuaded. It's a love that can only be given. And in the birth of Jesus, that love is poured out in its entirety. There is nothing held back. And it's the fullness of that self-giving love that led the first believers to claim that Jesus was not just a teacher with some good ideas or an inspiring spiritual leader but Emmanuel, God with us.

But this love is not just given to us to be admired or put under glass. That love changes us. God loves us without measure so that we can love the world the way God does. Not just loving those we like (our friends and family) or those we feel a sense of belonging with (our neighbors or fellow citizens). No, God empowers us to love because of our feelings, but because of God's love. God gives us the generosity to love the poor that we do not meet our standards of "deserving." God gives us the wisdom to love those we believe are someone else's responsibility. And God gives us the courage to love those whose experiences we would rather ignore.

This is a challenge, of course, but it is also a gift. To be transformed by God's love means to see the world through eyes of Christ, not constrained by our own narrow vision or parochial concerns. And to turn our attention to where the love of God manifests itself in our world. Not in the halls of power or the markets of wealth or in the homes of the feted, but in the lives of the hungry, the sick, the forgotten, the lonely, and those whom we believe to be unremarkable. It is in their redemption that we see the glory of God most clearly, for it is among them that Christ is born.

So as we see the presence of the Christ child in the manger tonight and gather around his presence at table once again, we see what love God has for us. Love that gives of itself. Love that knows no end. Love that turns toward the stranger. And God gives us this love to share with the world not because of our talents, our striving, or our achievements. But simply because that's how God is.

Gloria in excelsis Deo. Glory to God in the highest.

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