

Community Church of Issaquah

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## Love in the Advent

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Lighting the Advent Candle of Love today is certainly the very best way to come near the closure of this Advent Season. We've talked about finding hope and what that means; we've talked about peace and finding inner peace; and we've talked about joy and happiness in our everyday lives. Now we get to the very core of what this Christmas narrative is all about – love. Not a single one of us does not know what the word “love” means and how we experience it and how we show it. We know what that word means. And I had preached more than a couple of sermons about love if you recall. Today, though, I'd like to share with you four example of love in the story of the birth of Jesus. Before I get to those four examples of love, it would be wise if we come to an understanding of how love exists for our world.

For so many people, love can be defined as a feeling. When our hearts are full of a deep feeling for a person, an experience or even an object, that is evidence of love. We might utter the words, “I love you” to someone and that reflects our strong feelings for that person. Like so many of you, I never end a conversation with my son, Josh – those usually lasting at least 45 minutes – without me saying to him, “I love you.” It embarrassed him when he was a kid, but he's grown to accept it these days as a 48 year old father himself. He knows it expresses my feelings for him,

and I think he appreciates it now. Uttering the words “I love you” to anyone means so much to them and to us because it says that person is important to us and occupies a large place in our heart.

Feelings of love are definitely important to all of us and we must never lose those feelings. One lesson we can learn from the Advent Story though is that love can also be an action – not just **feeling** something but **doing** something. Love is an act. Let me share with you four examples of the act of love that we find in the story of the birth of Christ.

There is no part of the Advent story that touches me more than that of Joseph, the chosen father of Jesus. Here is a man who was respected and appreciated in his small and insignificant community of Nazareth where he was a carpenter. Following tradition, he was promised in marriage to a young woman from his village. It’s important to understand that Joseph and Mary were not strangers. Their families must have known each other to have arranged their wedding. Even though their marriage was arranged as a part of their tradition, underlying all of that were feelings that led to an act of love. When Joseph learned that the young woman he was supposed to marry was pregnant and he was not the father, he was faced with a very difficult decision.

He could have yielded to community practices and allowed her to be stoned for having had sex outside of marriage. Or he could have spoken in her defense but left her to live a life of shame and humiliation while he separated himself from the whole embarrassing situation. But he didn’t do

either of those things. Joseph listened to the advice of an angel. Risking his own reputation, he followed through on his commitment to his promised bride, Mary. He married her, refrained from any physical relation with her until after the birth of Jesus. Joseph put his deep love for God and Mary into action. The Bible tells us that Mary and Joseph had other children, and that he was a good father for Jesus. Sadly, he's not mentioned again after Jesus's twelfth birthday when they journeyed to the Temple in Jerusalem where the young Jesus spoke. For me, Joseph is one of my favorite Biblical characters. I believe that in God's plan for the salvation of the world, Joseph held a very important role. He put his feelings of love into acts of love. He was there at the moment of Jesus' birth, caring for his wife as she delivered a baby and caring for the baby who became the Promised Messiah. Love in action.

The most dramatic human story of the evidence of Advent love is the story of Mary. Here is a young woman in her teens, living an ordinary life in a small village, promised in marriage to a respectable man, with the hope of having a pleasant life like all the other women she knew. She strives to live out her faith as a God-fearing Jew. Then one night an angel comes to visit and tell her that she's going to get pregnant as a virgin and that she would have a baby who would be the Son of God. Can you imagine what must have been going through her mind at that time? Fear, anxiety, humility, uncertainty. It must have been so overwhelming for her. Perhaps that's why Mary decided to hurry from her village to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Maybe she felt the fear of what could happen to her and ran to escape what she did not know yet. Imagine her surprise to

find that her older cousin was also pregnant though she was well past the time of childbearing, and that she too had been visited by God's angel.

In spite of the complexities of her pregnancy, Mary took all her feelings for God and her child-to-be and put them into action. Traveling as mother-to-be in her ninth month to the town of Bethlehem as the law required for Joseph, a descendant of King David, to participate in a census. Om keeping with tradition, only Joseph was included in the count. There Mary found no warm and comfortable place to be, and alone with only her husband to help, she gave birth to God's son, Jesus. It was out of that devotion and amazing love that she and Joseph took the baby Messiah to Egypt for his safety, leaving family and community to honor her promise to God that she would be a faithful mother and follower. Yes, I'm sure that as she held that infant in her arms that first night her heart was overflowing with the feeling of love, and that is the source of her acts of love for the Child of God. That love was lived in her actions until the time of Jesus's death and after.

Suppose you were out in a field far away from your village in the middle of the night. Imagine yourself resting after having gathered your flock of sheep for safety and trying to sleep. Then out of nowhere an angel comes to pay you a visit. That must have put quite a frightening eye-opener for those shepherds which led the angel to offer them a comforting message. "Do not be afraid. I'm here to bring you good news. That Savior, that Messiah that you have waited for and prayed for has come. He was born this very night in Bethlehem and is waiting in a manger, wrapped in

cloths. Go see!” And then it wasn’t just one angel, it was a host of the heavenly beings there in the skies singing and praising God. It was such a time of wonder, causing the shepherds to totally leave their flocks and literally run into the village of Bethlehem to see what the angels had told them.

I’m quite sure my knees would be shaking if I were standing there in the night trying to make sense of it all. But here’s the thing – they took their love for their God whom they worshipped and put it into action. They left their sheep – not a wise thing, I’m sure – and hurried to find the baby as the angel had promised. Their acts of love were evident as they not only came to worship the Child of God, but as the Scriptures tell us, they spread the word about what had been told them and what they had seen, and everyone who heard it was amazed and believed. These were the first evangelists proclaiming the birth of Christ. They began the work of spreading the message of Jesus birth and God’s gift of salvation being offered to all. They put their love into action, too.

Advent actually begins with God’s doing something out of love for His created world. It begins with God putting His love into action. We can actually begin the story of the nativity birth of Jesus by quoting a Bible verse we learned from childhood. Do you remember John 3:16? “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” God’s love for the whole world was so immense that he took an incredible action. He sent his son Jesus to save us.

Throughout the Scriptures there are more than 100 references to love, and each of them goes beyond the feeling of love and focuses on doing something, on taking action based on those feelings of love. “Love one another as I have loved you” was a way for Jesus to tell his followers to **do** love – care for the poor, widows, exiled, all those who need acts of love, not only speak words. The story of Jesus’s birth is without a doubt the strongest example of God putting his love for us into action. As a parent, I cannot imagine sending my son to a place where I knew he would suffer and die, even if I knew he would be resurrected at the end. But Christmas is evidence of God’s love in action.

Every Advent and Christmas season, the messages of the fruits of the Spirit – Hope, Peace, Joy and Love have come to mean more and more to me as a Christian. As I meditated and looked for inspiration for a meaningful message that I could give to you, I was reminded again about the importance of putting love into action. Oh, we’re all going to do that this year, I am sure. Out of love for someone, we’re going to buy a gift, wrap it and place it under a tree. Out of love, we’ll share a meal that was prepared for us as an act of love. Putting our feelings into action, we’ll donate to a charity, or give to an unhoused person standing on a corner asking for help. With our feelings of love in hand, we’ll smile at a stranger.

I believe with all my heart that it is your deep feeling of love for this church and your fellow worshippers that led you to put love into action as you join in this worship service, singing, praying, listening. It is from your feelings of love

that you reach out that hand to shake with someone as you welcome them. These are just some of the ways so many of you put your feelings of your love of God and this church into action.

As Advent comes to a close on Christmas Eve, my prayer is that we will give thought to being a people who put our faith and love into action. I want to take my love of Christ and my calling into ministry and turn it into actions of love each day of my life. All around us is the evidence that we not only have heard the messages of Advent, but that we choose to live it every day as we anticipate the coming of Christ again. We cherish God's wonderful gift of love that he has put into action in our lives. It is not only a feeling, but an act of love. So what are you going to do this Christmas to put your love into action? I know it will be amazing.

Amen and a Blessed Advent.