

BORN IN A MANGER: GOD'S GIFT OF LOVE

Luke 2:1–7

Key Verse: 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 place for them in the inn.”

What is love? I'm sure you all have your own conceptions and ideas of what love is and should look like, but where do those come from? I've personally watched my fair share of Korean dramas growing up to have developed an idea that human love is fated, can lead to heartbreak, and is a tad bit toxic. But that can be exhausting, frustrating, and lead us to feel that it is not worth pursuing. Maybe your perception of love has changed over time and with your life experiences. Another question that comes to mind is, do you feel loved? Generally, we may have a small circle of people who we can say that we genuinely love and feel loved by, which might include our parents, children, siblings, close friends, and a significant other. But if I were to ask you, “How do you know that you are loved?” What would you say? What are the ways that you want to be loved and are those needs being met?

Unfortunately, not feeling loved is often accompanied with feelings of loneliness, dissatisfaction, and shame. Today that is an epidemic as recent surveys have shown that 1 in 3 adults in the US feel lonely (US News), and 31% of Americans say that they feel lonely often or almost always (Statista). This holiday season is a time of joy and celebration, but for some of us it may be a reminder of our loneliness if we are not able to experience the holiday spirit. I hope that as we have been listening to the advent messages by Becky and Michael over the last two weeks that our hearts have been preparing to receive baby Jesus who brings us hope, peace, love, and joy!

Today as we reflect on the birth of Jesus, we enter a story that reveals the depth of God's extraordinary love. In a humble manger in Bethlehem, the Savior of the world was born—not in power or splendor, but in simplicity and vulnerability. This setting was no accident; it was a profound statement of love. God chose to meet us in our need, identifying with the lowly and forgotten, demonstrating that His love reaches into every corner of our lives. This sermon will have three parts to it; first we will look at Caesar's rule, then we will look at Joseph's love for Mary and his decision of faith, and lastly, we will look at the birth of Jesus, the humble king. Today, let us explore how this humble beginning reflects the limitless, compassionate love of God—a love that chose to dwell among us, offering hope and light to all.

I. Caesar's Rule

As a history teacher, I'd like to set the stage and give some context to the passage. Understanding the context of the historical situation, we can get a glimpse into the world that our Lord Jesus was being born into. The passage opens with a decree from Caesar Augustus, the first Roman Emperor, that all people in the Roman empire register themselves (v. 1-2). Most

historians regard Caesar Augustus as one of the greatest and most pivotal leaders in world history. He is widely praised for transforming Rome from a fractured republic into a stable and prosperous empire. His reign marked the beginning of the *Pax Romana*, a 200-year period of peace and economic growth that laid the foundation for Rome's enduring influence. This census was likely an empire-wide effort to register inhabitants for tax purposes, and served as a demonstration of Rome's power and control over Judea. For the Jewish people, the imposition by Caesar Augustus most likely intensified their anticipation of a Messiah who would deliver them from the oppression of the Romans.

We see here that despite Caesar's political prowess and strength, people in his empire did not feel loved and many were oppressed. I think it's safe to say that most people are in awe in the presence of political leaders or celebrities. There is a certain way they carry themselves that demands respect and displays their power and charisma, or, as the youth of this generation like to call it, "aura." Some people that come to mind from my generation might include Tom Brady, LeBron James, Taylor Swift, Elon Musk, to mention a few. Many people are superfans or even in love with celebrities, leaders, or athletes, but do they love them back? I remember when the Blackhawks and Cubs won the Stanley Cup and World Series; it was a time of joy and celebration, but after a few days, those feelings dissipated and nothing in my life changed.

Even when we think about elections— which I know nowadays is a very divisive issue—no matter who we've elected, they have not solved our problems and their decisions or lack thereof indicate that they do not love us, and if anything encourage us to hate each other. When the people we elect who are supposed to lead, care, and provide for us don't love us, what are we to do? As we heard from Becky and Michael's messages, this world is so harsh and life is so difficult that it is no surprise that many of us may feel restless and hopeless. However, we can have hope and peace knowing that our God loves us and sent His one and only son for us to give us life and freedom. The world tells us that power cannot be accompanied by love. But that is why the gospel message is so radical and so transformative. Because, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). The Creator of this Universe left his throne in heaven to come be with us, so that we can know just how much he loves us. May we earnestly pray to prepare our hearts to receive our Lord Jesus Christ this Christmas season.

II. Joseph's love for Mary

Verses 3–4 say, "And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David." The journey from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea covered approximately 90 miles, a challenging trek through rough and sometimes dangerous terrain. According to my research—a simple Google search—the journey would have taken 4 days, assuming they were walking 8 hours a day, but most likely it took a lot longer. I have never been pregnant, and never will be so I don't know the difficulties of having to carry another human in my belly. But for most pregnant women, they can expect to gain 30-40 lbs. Though most modern portrayals of this journey include a donkey, there is no

mention of one in Scripture, and so we can assume that she may have been walking with Joseph on foot.

For Mary, who was likely in the late stages of pregnancy, this journey would have been brutal. If this journey was so dangerous, the question arises, why was Mary tagging along? The answer is, Joseph loved Mary. Joseph's love for Mary is one of the most profound examples of selfless and sacrificial love in the Bible. When Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant, he initially planned to divorce her quietly to avoid public disgrace (Matthew 1:19). However, when the angel revealed to him that Mary's child was conceived by the Holy Spirit and that he was to name the child Jesus, Joseph demonstrated incredible faith and obedience. He chose to stay by Mary's side, protecting her from judgment and committing himself to her and the child she carried. This decision was not easy; it required humility, courage, and a deep love that prioritized her well-being over his reputation or personal plans.

Joseph's love for Mary was a beautiful reflection of God's love for her. Just as God chose Mary for the sacred role of bearing His Son, He also provided her with a partner who would support her through this extraordinary calling. Joseph's actions reveal the ways in which God cares for His people, not just in miraculous ways but through the steadfast love and faithfulness of others. By staying with Mary, Joseph became a vessel of God's provision and protection, embodying the divine love that surrounded her. His unwavering commitment reassured her that she was not alone in her journey, reminding us of how God places people in our lives to manifest His care and love in tangible ways.

III.A Humble King

Verses 6–7 says, “And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. “ Upon their arrival, they found no available lodging, likely due to the influx of travelers for the census. As a result, they took shelter in a space typically reserved for animals, likely in a stable or a cave. In this sad and pathetic environment, Mary gave birth to Jesus, wrapping Him in swaddling cloths. She then laid Him in a manger—an animal feeding box—further exemplifying the humble and poor nature of the occasion.

How humiliating and pathetic this scene must've been. Since everyone was in town to register, we can also assume that many of Mary and Joseph's relatives were there, and even so, no room was made for a pregnant woman going into labor. I can only imagine how Mary must've felt. In such a dirty and uninhabitable place for her firstborn child, she must've been confused, ashamed, and sobbing. Where was God's love and glory in this situation? Did it have to be this harsh? The Prophet Isaiah said this about the promised Messiah in 700 BC, “For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted” (Is 53:2–4).

Think back to the questions I asked you at the beginning of this sermon. What is love? Do you feel loved? Oftentimes, the people who claim to love us end up being the ones that hurt us the most because we end up holding them to a much higher standard than anyone else. Even when they try their best, it may not be enough and because we are all human, pride or selfishness may leave us feeling unsatisfied or even worse, wounded and traumatized. In this passage there is a stark contrast between Jesus and Caesar. Both kings in their own regard, one claimed to love his people but was a shrewd and ruthless leader who dominated them instead. The other was born in the most humble of conditions and lived among the working class, and often in the margins with outcasts. Despite his kingship, Jesus chose to be born in a humble setting. Why did God come to us in this way?

Though he is Almighty God, he did not rule over us or love us from a distance. No, God came to be with us and in such a lowly manner, so that we can know that he understands our trauma. He knows that his world is heartless, and he knows what it feels like to be hurt and feel hopeless. Jesus came to be our healer, and he alone knows best how to restore us and love us. Born in a manger, died on a cross. This is the perfect representation of the love of God. 2 Corinthians 8:9 says, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich." It makes no sense why a king, let alone God, would give up everything, and give up everything for the "losers" of this world. And though there is no rhyme or reason, we can have complete assurance and feel God's deep love for us because of his sacrifice and by coming to be with us.

IV. Personal Application

Growing up there have been plenty of moments where I have felt lonely, afraid, and hopeless. As a child I had recurring pneumonia which left me in the hospital on multiple occasions, and I remember waking up in the middle of the night sometimes with no one around me. When my family moved to Evanston, I was harassed and bullied at school, which led me to develop an inferiority complex. I had no success in dating and almost every single girl that I liked growing up either rejected me or never paid me any attention.

As a result, I've tried to find happiness and hope in so many things. I've always loved sports, but beginning in college I started to get into working out and eating healthy. I thought if I developed a nice enough body, no girl would ever be able to turn me down and I would gain the respect and admiration from the bros. However, as the muscles got bigger and waist got smaller, there were still no girls so I felt defeated and stopped caring about what I ate as evident in my weight right now... In college I also started partying heavily thinking that would make me popular and make a lot of friends, but I always left each party feeling terrible physically and empty as the interactions I had with other people were so shallow.

Once I graduated college and eventually secured a full-time teaching job, I was met with several inquiries from my parents if I was open to being introduced to a Christian girl. Though I kept pushing back, saying that I was too young to consider marriage or too immature, an additional

truth was that I just wasn't interested in any of the girls that were being brought up. The constant "You need a 'suitable helper' or wife" from members in the church also started to play on my existing desire to be in a relationship. So I decided to take things into my own hands and ended up falling for a girl. I had been praying so earnestly that God show me a clear sign that she was "the one" that I completely blinded myself to actually seeing the clear signs that she wasn't interested. I had put so much hope into this person, that when it didn't end up working out, I was absolutely crushed and shattered. I felt so wronged and played (keep in mind that this was self-inflicted), but more than that I felt so lonely and unlovable. My insecurities from my childhood started to resurface and I couldn't help but start to develop anger and borderline hatred in my heart.

In the meantime, I had to prepare myself for the Vision Camp and high school program at the ISBC that I would be helping to lead. While studying John 19, the crucifixion passage, I started to question why Jesus would allow himself to go through all of that suffering? Where is the glory in that? While studying with Tony over Zoom, I was deeply moved by the key verse, Isaiah 50:7: "But the Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame." When I thought about Jesus, who had come to give rest to the weary and to heal those who needed healing, I was heartbroken thinking about the hurt he must have experienced when he was betrayed by the people he loved and came to serve. He deserved to be honored, praised, and worshiped, but instead he experienced shame, persecution, and then ultimately was put to death in the most humiliating and excruciating way possible. I was moved to tears and for the first time I could really feel the love of Christ and I knew that he understood the pain I was experiencing. God opened my eyes that night to see that Jesus truly loves me so much. He assured me that I don't have to find validation or worth from other people's love or approval, but instead that I can find satisfaction, joy, and peace in knowing that He loves me.

Take a moment to reflect: Have you ever felt lonely or unseen? What does it mean to you that Jesus, who was born in such a humble way, came to show God's love to you? Jesus' birth in humble circumstances shows that He came for everyone, especially those who feel isolated or overlooked. Born in a manger, far from comfort and familiarity, His entry into the world reminds us that God identifies with those who experience loneliness and hardship. Similarly, we may think about who are the oppressed and marginalized today. We are currently witnessing a war in Ukraine, genocide in Gaza, drug cartels running rampant, and so much political turmoil in our own country. Jesus also calls us to consider how we can extend His love to others. Who in your life might be feeling lonely? How can you, inspired by His example, create a sense of belonging for them? Jesus' life assures us that no one is beyond God's care, and He invites us to be part of His work in bringing comfort and connection to those in need. In what ways might you embrace that calling this Christmas season? 1 John 4:7 says, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God."

Unlike most nobility and high class people, God did not come for the qualified and righteous. He came for all sinners, and especially for the ones that society has deemed to be lost and hopeless. 1 John 4:9–10 says, "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we

have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” There is no other love that can truly satisfy or heal our souls from the wounds caused by this world. Because Jesus came down to be with us, we can know that he truly understands our pain and experiences. And because he lived a holy and righteous life, he showed us and continues to encourage us to follow his example and leading.

It’s not easy to believe this message. It’s so contradictory to what we have experienced in this world. But I pray that we may all be filled with the Holy Spirit to really be convinced that God truly loves us. As we reflect on the humble birth of Jesus, we are reminded of the depth of God’s love for us—a love that chose to enter the world not in power or grandeur but in simplicity and vulnerability. This humble beginning teaches us that God’s love reaches into the most unexpected places and touches the lives of the forgotten and lonely. It challenges us to embrace that same love in our own lives, to extend compassion to others, and to recognize that true greatness is found in serving and loving as Christ did. May we leave here today with hearts open to God’s transforming love, and ready to share it with the world around us.