

***Advent Series: The Four Love Stories of Christmas***  
***Part III: Love Came Down***  
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As we continue on in our series of messages we are calling, “The Four Love Stories of Christmas”, we are looking at four passages from Luke’s gospel that may help us see the different kinds of love of God that may be present in our lives today – whether we recognize them or not. Richard Selzer is a surgeon who tells a story of what happened to him in the hospital room of a young woman who had just come out of surgery:

I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed. To remove the tumor in her cheek, I had to cut the little nerve. Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously, greedily? The young woman speaks, “Will my mouth always be like this?” she asks. “Yes,” I say, “it will. It is because the nerve was cut.” She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles. “I like it,” he says, “It is kind of cute.” All at once I know who he is. I understand and I lower my gaze. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth and I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works. (Richard Selzer, *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*)

Selzer goes on to say that he recognized the presence of God in that moment. I think that image of love expressed as that young husband bends “down” to kiss his wife may open the door for us to explore this familiar Christmas story about the birth of Christ in new ways.

This morning our passage is from Luke 2:1-7:

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

The title of today’s message, “Love Came Down,” is from a poem about this story we have just read. “Love Came Down at Christmas” is a poem by Christina Rossetti. It was first published without a title in 1885. However, it was later included in the collection called *Verses* in 1893. The poem has been set to music as a Christmas carol by many composers. It goes this way:

Love came down at Christmas,  
Love all lovely, love divine;  
Love was born at Christmas,  
Star and angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,  
Love incarnate, love divine;  
Worship we our Jesus:  
But wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token,  
Love shall be yours and love be mine,  
Love to God and to all men,  
Love for plea and gift and sign.

So, what does it mean when we say that “love came down?” Well, at Christmas we focus on the love of God as expressed in Jesus, the Son of God, who came “down” to earth as a human child. Of course, we no longer believe in a three-tiered universe in which heaven is literally “up.” Up and down are metaphors to express the idea that Jesus, as a part of the trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, comes to us from the presence of God. And Jesus comes as fully human and fully divine at the same time, to be born and to walk on the same ground that you and I walk on. So in a sense, God’s love for us is “well-grounded.”

Now, being “grounded” can mean different things. For example, to a pilot or for those waiting for a flight, being grounded is not always a good thing – unless the plane has a mechanical issue that needs to be fixed and thankfully someone caught it. Or, pilots themselves may be grounded for something like health issues. More commonly, weather may leave us grounded.

However, if we think of what it means to be *well*-grounded, it means something very different. The term “well-grounded” actually goes back to the 1300s. It can be defined as having a good foundation as in being well-founded; having good training in a subject or activity; based on good reasons; experienced, educated, knowledgeable. So, as we think about the love of God coming down at Christmas, I want to invite us to consider these questions:

- Can love be well-grounded?
- What is love’s foundation?
- What are some of the “good reasons” on which love is based?
- What might it mean to be experienced, educated, and knowledgeable about real love?
- Who can show us what well-grounded love looks like?
- Finally, what would it look like to live out well-grounded love in our lives today?

When it comes to the love story we have just read from Luke’s gospel, I believe it is “grounded” in a couple of ways. First of all, I believe that because of the way Luke chooses to tell this story of God’s love, *it is grounded in place and time.*

Notice how Luke begins in telling about the birth of Jesus: “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.” (Luke 2:1, NIV) Now that is not the way I would normally think to start a love story, but I think Luke does this for a very specific reason. Luke begins announcing the birth of Jesus with the reigning king, Caesar -- who ruled in a certain place and time. This Jesus will be the Messiah sent by God to save the world. He was also the Son of God who would be the new king sent to usher in and rule over a different kind of Kingdom – the kingdom of God. Luke began by acknowledging the present “king” -- who is Caesar, in order to announce the birth of the new king -- Jesus. Jesus is not born with earthly wealth and in a palace like the one in which Caesar lives. No, this new king “comes down” and is born in a humble manger because there was not even a room for Mary and Joseph in the local inn. He comes first to those who are the poor and powerless. So, God’s love came down and was well-grounded in place and time. This was a real, historical event that would change all of history.

Jesus came down and was not only grounded in place and time -- *that event was also grounded in God’s love*. That first grounding in place and time was, in a sense literal and historical. This other “grounding” in God’s love is more relational and theological. By that I mean that God’s love coming down to this world shows how God wants to restore our relationships with God and with each other.

Not only that, God chooses to come in a way that is probably not what we would expect. Sometimes we may wonder why God chose to come in the form of a baby, born in relative obscurity in a small, out of the way country. Why didn’t God just announce it for all the world to see? Why didn’t God just reveal who God is from the start, in all of God’s glory? If God wanted to convince us of God’s love, was this really the best way to do it?

Over the years, some of our best Christian thinkers have suggested that God chose to do it this way because if God had revealed who God is in all of God’s glory, it would-be so overwhelming that we would not really have a choice as to whether or not to accept God’s love. God came down and “dialed it down” – way down! Maybe something closer to home may help us grasp this.

I don’t know what it was like when you were a kid, but for me, I could not wait for Christmas morning to come. I had a hard time going to sleep the night before. I would wake up early and look at my clock – seeing the numbers go by ever so slowly. I could not understand why my parents did not want to get up at 5:00 a.m. to go unwrap presents. But at some point, I convinced everyone to get up. In our house we had a long hallway that led to the living room where the tree and presents were. The door to the living room was kept closed until the big moment. But we could not go in yet. Dad had to go in first and get his movie camera set up and working in order to get pictures of me and my sister coming into the room. Now some of you may remember something like this. My Dad had this 8 mm Bell & Howell movie camera mounted on a metal bar that held two huge movie lights. And when I talk about lights, I mean these huge bulbs that put out the kind of light you see as searchlights on the towers in prison movies. So, Dad would get in there first with the tree and presents as we waited behind the closed door -- until he said the magic words, “OK, come on in!” Then we would walk in with those lights hitting us in the eyes. They were blinding. We felt like we were trying to escape from prison and had been

caught. All of our movies from that time show these two little kids walking with our hands over our eyes.

I believe that if we were to actually see God unfiltered in all of God's glory, it would be so overwhelming that we would have no real choice in how we respond – like being hit in the eyes with bright lights -- you can't help but squint. I think that God loves us so much as to give us a real choice about whether we respond to God's love or not. So, God comes down in the form of a child in a way that leaves us to the possibility of choosing to believe or not. We could probably look at every story of God's love and the life of Jesus and come up with another possible explanation, other than God. Some of the great cultural critics of faith have done so over the years. Sigmund Freud said religion was all our desire to recreate a "father" in heaven to fulfill our needs for a perfect father figure. Karl Marx said religion was simply an opiate for those in power to control the masses. But, I believe God loves us so much as to give us the choice of whether or not to believe in God and respond to God's love. So, God not only comes down, but dials it down, way down, to give us a choice.

What that means for us today, is that *our love, too, needs to be well-grounded*. It needs to be grounded in the belief that God really did send Jesus to this earth to be the savior of the world. -- to show us with his life how to live and love. He died and gave his life for each one of us on a Roman cross and for the whole world. And on that first Easter, he was resurrected from the dead to show us that God's love is stronger than even death, and that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. From that time on, the reign of this new king has been breaking into our world, and it will continue to break in until Christ returns one final time to set things right. That is our hope well-grounded in the love of God.

So, what might that well-grounded look like in our day and time? I heard a story about how this might look in real life:

It had been a trying week at the Love & Action office, a Christian ministry to people with AIDS. At five o'clock on a Friday, Jeffrey, who worked there, was looking forward to having a quiet dinner with friends. Then the phone rang.

"Jeff! It's Jimmy!" He heard a quivering voice say. Jimmy, who suffered from several AIDS-related illnesses, was one of their regular clients. "I'm really sick, Jeff. I've got a fever. Please help me."

Jeffery was angry. After a sixty-hour work week, he didn't want to hear about Jimmy. But he promised to be right over. Still, during the drive over, he complained to God about the inconvenience.

The moment he walked in the door, he could smell the stench. Jimmy was on the sofa, shivering and in distress. Jeff wiped his forehead, then got a bucket of soapy water to clean up the mess. He managed to maintain a facade of concern, even though he was raging inside. Jimmy's friend, Russ, who also had AIDS, came down the stairs. The odor made Russ sick, too. As Jeffery cleaned the carpet around the chair, he was ready to explode inside.

Then Russ startled him, saying “I understand! I understand!”

“What, Russ?” Jimmy said weakly.

“I understand who Jesus is,” Russ said through tears. “He's like Jeff!”

Weeping, Jeffery hugged Russ and prayed with him. That night Russ opened his life up to Christ -- a God who had used someone like Jeffery to show God’s love, in spite of himself. (As told by Jeffrey Collins, *Christian Reader*, Vol. 36, no. 2.)

Friends, I believe our love must also be grounded in tangible ways of showing the love of Jesus to others who are in need. Around JCPC, I see this a lot. For example, when our members spontaneously provide meals for those who are in need. Or when our Stephen ministers take baskets of cards to those who are homebound. And when people give generously to those who are in need through our mission partners and through opportunities like our recent, new Alternative Gift Fair that raised over \$3,100. Or, for those Thirteen AA and 12-Step weekly group meetings that provide a face-to-face way for members of our community to overcome addictions. Also, our trained CanCare volunteers who visit with those battling cancer as they receive their treatments. Each of these is a well-grounded expression of God’s love. And each one of us can do something similar.

God can use us, even, as that story said, even “in spite of” ourselves! So, let God’s love “come down” this Christmas to you. And let it come down through you as well, in tangible acts of well-grounded love. In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.