

PSALM 89:1-8 – JOHN 1 1:1-5 &14 – JOHN 3:16-17

A WOMAN SHARED A STORY ABOUT HER SON'S ELEMENTARY SCHOOL HOLIDAY PROGRAM-- DRESS REHEARSAL. SHE HAD TO WORK THE EVENING OF THE PROGRAM SO WENT THAT AFTERNOON.

THE CHILDREN PRESENTED THE EXPECTED SEASONAL PROGRAM UNTIL NEAR THE END WHEN SHE WAS SURPRISED TO FIND CHRISTMAS MENTIONED, IN ONE GROUP.

EACH CHILD HAD A LETTER TO HOLD UP AND GIVE A WORD THE LETTER REPRESENTED. WHEN ALL LETTERS WERE DISPLAYED THE MESSAGE WAS SUPPOSED TO SAY: "CHRISTMAS LOVE."

HOWEVER, ONE CHILD ACCIDENTALLY HELD THE LETTER "M" UPSIDE DOWN. THE CHILDREN OF THE OTHER GRADES WHO SAW THIS BEGAN TO LAUGH.

HOWEVER WHEN THE LAST LETTER WAS RAISED-THEY ALL BECAME SILENT BECAUSE INSTEAD OF SPELLING CHRISTMAS LOVE, THE MESSAGE READ: "CHRIST WAS LOVE".

CHRIST WAS LOVE, AND IS, LOVE- IS ONE OF THE IMPORTANT MESSAGES OF CHRISTMAS.

THIS IS WHY THE MOST WELL KNOWN NEW TESTAMENT VERSE, JOHN 3:16, IS AS FITTING FOR ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS AS IT IS FOR LENT AND EASTER:

"FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON, SO THAT ALL WHO BELIEVE IN HIM WILL NOT PERISH, BUT WILL HAVE ETERNAL LIFE".

JESUS IS INDEED GOD'S LOVE PERSONIFIED, AS THE OPENING LINES OF A POEM BY CHRISTINA ROSSETTI EXPRESSES:

"LOVE CAME DOWN AT CHRISTMAS, LOVE ALL LOVELY, LOVE DIVINE; LOVE WAS BORN AT CHRISTMAS, STAR AND ANGELS GAVE THE SIGN."

MESSAGES ABOUT GOD'S LOVE, ARE FOUND THROUGHOUT THE BIBLE.

TODAY'S READING FROM PSALM 89 IS JUST ONE, SMALL, BUT POWERFUL EXAMPLE.

IN THE PASSAGE DAVID REJOICES IN THE LOVE OF GOD THAT IS STEADFAST, SURE, AND CAN BE COUNTED ON.

HE EXPRESSES HIS CONFIDENCE IN GOD'S FAITHFUL LOVE FOR HIMSELF AND ALL HIS PEOPLE.

THE MESSAGE OF THE PSALM IS THAT GOD, THE MIGHTY AND ALL POWERFUL GOD OF HEAVEN AND EARTH, LOVES DAVID AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE.

BUT THEN CAME JESUS, AND THE MESSAGE GIVEN TO THE EVANGELIST JOHN THAT BECAME THE HEART OF BOTH HIS GOSPEL AND THE NEW TESTAMENT SAYS- GOD LOVES THE WORLD.

A COMMENTARY ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN REMINDS US THAT THE IDEA GOD'S LOVE IS FOR THE WHOLE WORLD IS A DISTINCTLY CHRISTIAN IDEA.

YES, THERE ARE HINTS OF THE UNIVERSALITY OF GOD'S LOVE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.

HOWEVER, IT WAS NOT UNTIL THIS LOVE CAME TO BE INCARNATE IN JESUS THAT THE WIDENESS OF GOD'S LOVE BEGAN TO BE SEEN.

THE STORY OF THE WORD OF GOD WHO TOOK PART IN CREATION, BECOMING FLESH TO DWELL AMONG US, AS ONE OF US- IS POWERFUL.

JESUS, THE GOSPELS REVEAL IS GOD'S GIFT OF HIMSELF TO THE WORLD.

HE IS A GIFT OF LOVE, AND HOPE, AND JOY, AND PEACE UNEQUALED BY ANY OTHER GIFT.

JESUS, BY HIS HUMAN LIFE AND DEATH SHOWS US THE COSTLY NATURE OF GOD'S LOVE.

INDEED, JESUS AS THE BEARER AND MESSENGER OF GOD'S LOVE TEACHES US THAT THE CREATOR HAS NOT ABANDONED THE WORLD TO SIN.

JESUS, AND THE SALVATION HE BRINGS IS THE CHRISTMAS GIFT THAT LASTS FOREVER.

HE REMINDS US THAT REAL LOVE IS NOT A SENTIMENTAL FEELING, BUT IS FOUND MOST FULLY IN ACTION.

GIFTS OF LOVE ARE A PART OF THE CELEBRATION OF CHRISTMAS, EVEN AMONG THOSE WHO HAVE NOT EXPERIENCED THE TRUTH THAT CHRIST WAS LOVE MADE FLESH.

TRULY, GIVING IS A LARGE PART OF OUR CULTURAL PRACTICE DURING THIS SEASON.

INDEED THE ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF GIFT GIVING IS ONE REASON CHRISTMAS IS A NATIONAL HOLIDAY.

HOWEVER, THE ORIGINS OF THIS PRACTICE, AS WE KNOW IT TODAY WAS NOT FOR ECONOMIC GAIN, BUT BORN OUT OF ONE MAN'S LOVE FOR OTHERS.

THE INSPIRATION FOR SANTA CLAUS IN THE U.S. AND FATHER CHRISTMAS IN GREAT BRITAIN, AS WELL AS OTHER FIGURES ELSEWHERE IN THE WORLD-WAS A MAN NAMED NICHOLAS.

ST. NICOLAS WAS BORN OF GREEK PARENTS IN WHAT IS NOW SOUTHERN TURKEY. HE BECAME A MONK, AND EVENTUALLY A BISHOP.

HE WAS ORPHANED AS A TEEN, AND INHERITED A LARGE FORTUNE FROM HIS WEALTHY PARENTS.

BUT RATHER THAN SPENDING IT PRIMARILY ON HIMSELF, HE CHOSE TO SHARE IT WITH THOSE HE KNEW NEEDED HELP.

NICOLAS, AS THE STORY GOES, WOULD DISGUISE HIMSELF AND DELIVER TO PEOPLE IN HIS TOWN FOOD, CLOTHING, AND EVEN MONEY, DEPENDING ON THE NEED HE OBSERVED.

ONE STORY SAYS HE HELPED A POOR FAMILY WITH THREE DAUGHTERS HE WAS PARTICULARLY CONCERNED FOR.

HE HELPED BY TOSSING A SMALL BAG OF GOLD INTO A WINDOW IN THE HOUSE EACH TIME ONE OF THE DAUGHTERS REACHED THE AGE SHE COULD MARRY.

THE GOLD WAS FOR HER DOWRY, WHICH OTHERWISE COULD NOT BE OFFERED, THUS LIMITING HER CHANCE OF MARRIAGE.

HOWEVER, WHEN HE DID THIS FOR THE THIRD DAUGHTER, HER FATHER HAPPENED TO SEE THAT IT WAS NICOLAS WHO WAS THE BENEFACTOR.

HE BEGGED THE MAN NOT TO REVEAL WHO HAD GIVEN THE GIFT, BUT EVENTUALLY THE STORY GOT OUT.

IT WAS ALSO LEARNED THAT EVERY DECEMBER NICOLAS SECRETLY PROVIDED GIFTS OF FOOD AND OTHER THINGS TO POOR CHILDREN.

HIS LOVE FOR CHILDREN, AND GIFTS HE GAVE TO THEM IN EARLY DECEMBER, IS WHAT IS BELIEVED TO HAVE INSPIRED GIVING GIFTS AROUND CHRISTMAS.

HERE IN THE NORTH COUNTY, WE FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF GIVING TO CHILDREN AND OTHERS OUT OF LOVE FOR THEM, AND FOR MANY LOVE FOR THE LORD ALSO.

THERE ARE MANY ORGANIZATIONS AND PROGRAMS THAT OFFER GIFTS OF HATS AND GLOVES, BLANKETS, TOYS, CLOTHES, AND FOOD- TO FAMILIES AND INDIVIDUALS.

ALL OF THIS GIVING IS A WAY TO SHOW LOVE FOR OTHERS, IT IS A WAY EVEN FOR THOSE WHO DO NOT BELIEVE IN JESUS AS THEIR SAVIOR, TO BE BEARERS OF GOD'S LOVE.

ST. NICOLAS GAVE OUT OF LOVE FOR GOD AND OTHERS. HE GAVE FROM HIMSELF BECAUSE HE FELT THE LOVE OF GOD IN HIS OWN LIFE.

INDEED, HE UNDERSTOOD THAT IN BABY JESUS, BORN OF MARY, GOD'S LOVE CAME DOWN AT CHRISTMAS.

NICOLAS WAS INSPIRED TO USE HIS RESOURCES TO SHOW THAT LOVE.

THIS GIFT OF LOVE IN THE FORM OF JESUS – GOD INCARNATE WAS NO ACCIDENTAL OFFERING.

JESUS WAS THE FULFILLMENT OF GOD'S PROMISE TO KING DAVID THAT ONE FROM HIS HOUSE WOULD RULE FOREVER.

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE TELLS US HIS INCARNATION AND BIRTH WAS PART OF GOD'S PLAN TO SAVE HIS PEOPLE, AND ULTIMATELY ALL PEOPLE FROM THEIR SIN.

FOR BEFORE GOD WORKED THROUGH ST. NICOLAS, OR ANYONE ELSE TO SHARE HIS LOVE WITH THE WORLD, GOD WORKED THROUGH MARY.

REMEMBER THE WORDS OF GABRIEL: "GREETINGS, O FAVORED ONE, THE LORD IS WITH YOU... THE HOLY SPIRIT WILL COME UPON YOU, AND THE POWER OF THE MOST HIGH WILL OVERSHADOW YOU.

THEREFORE THE CHILD TO BE BORN WILL BE HOLY; HE WILL BE CALLED THE SON OF GOD."

THUS, MARY WAS GIVEN THE GIFT OF BEING THE MOTHER OF JESUS, GOD'S GIFT OF LOVE.

THROUGH HER, AND HER WILLINGNESS TO GIVE HER LIFE OVER TO THE FATHER'S WILL, THE INCARNATION WAS MADE POSSIBLE- AND LOVE CAME DOWN AT WHAT WE NOW CALL CHRISTMAS.

ANOTHER PREACHER SHARED IN A SERMON HOW HE VIEWS CHRISTMAS AS BEING ABOUT A FATHER EXPRESSING HIS LOVE FOR HIS CHILDREN.

HE DREW HIS UNDERSTANDING, NOT ONLY FROM SCRIPTURE, BUT FROM HIS OWN CHILDHOOD.

HIS OWN DAD STARTED A CHRISTMAS FAMILY TRADITION THAT ALL OF HIS FIVE CHILDREN CHERISHED.

HE SAID ABOUT HIS FATHER: "SO GREAT WAS HIS LOVE FOR HIS CHILDREN THAT NO REGULAR CHRISTMAS STOCKING WOULD DO.

NO CHRISTMAS STOCKING WAS LARGE ENOUGH TO HOLD ALL THAT HE WANTED TO GIVE US.

NO STOCKING COULD DISPLAY THE CHRISTMAS MESSAGE HE WANTED US TO SEE. ONLY HIS HAND DRAWN PAPER BAGS COULD PROPERLY EXPRESS HIS LOVE FOR US."

SO, ON CHRISTMAS EVE, AFTER THE CHILDREN WENT UP TO BED, HIS FATHER TOOK A BROWN PAPER GROCERY BAG FOR EACH CHILD.

THE MAN, SPENT HOURS, DECORATING EACH BAG WITH A DIFFERENT AND SPECIAL CHRISTMAS SCENE FOR EACH CHILD.

HE PUT THE CHILD'S NAME ON THE BAG, AND FILLED IT WITH FRUIT, CANDY, TOYS, AND OTHER SMALL ITEMS.

THE MOST EXCITING THING ON CHRISTMAS MORNING FOR THE CHILDREN WAS TO SEE THE UNIQUE BAG THEIR FATHER HAD CREATED FOR EACH ONE OF THEM.

THE MAN ADDED THAT IF HIS FATHER HAD ONLY KNOWN THEY CARED MORE ABOUT THOSE BAGS THAN ANY OTHER GIFT THEY RECEIVED-HIS PARENTS COULD HAVE SAVED A LOT OF MONEY BY NOT BUYING OTHER GIFTS.

IT WAS IN HIS DAD'S GIFT OF HIMSELF GIVEN TO EACH CHILD THAT THE PREACHER COULD SEE A REFLECTION OF GOD'S GREATER LOVE FOR THE WORLD; AS WELL AS GOD'S SPECIAL LOVE FOR EACH PERSON.

THE EXAMPLE THE FATHER OF THOSE FIVE CHILDREN SHOWS US IS IN THE VALUE OF GIVING A PART OF OURSELVES, WHEN POSSIBLE, WITH EACH GIFT.

THIS IS WHAT MARY DID IN HER WILLINGNESS TO BE THE MOTHER OF JESUS.

AND, TO AN EVEN GREATER DEGREE, IT IS WHAT GOD, OUR HEAVENLY FATHER, HAS DONE IN THE GIFT OF JESUS HIS SON, OUR SAVIOR.

REMEMBER THE MEANING OF THE CANDLE OF LOVE. ITS LIGHT REMINDS US OF THE PERFECT LOVE GOD GIVES TO US IN THE GIFT OF THE CHRIST CHILD, WHO WAS BORN TO SAVE THE WORLD.

FURTHERMORE, IN JESUS, GOD'S LOVE NOT ONLY CAME DOWN AT CHRISTMAS, BUT THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT, ABIDES IN THE HEARTS OF THOSE WHO RECEIVE THE FATHER'S GIFT OF LOVE.

LET US PRAY:

BLESSED LORD, YOU HAVE GIVEN US YOUR GREATEST GIFT—YOUR VERY WORD WHO CAME TO EARTH, TO LIVE WITH US, AND ABIDES WITHIN US.

WE GIVE THANKS FOR THE GIFT OF LOVE FOUND IN JESUS WHO HAS BROUGHT SALVATION TO ALL WHO WILL RECEIVE HIM.

WE PRAISE YOU FOR HIS SACRIFICE OF LOVE THAT HAS REDEEMED US, AND SHOWN US HOW TO LOVE YOU AND OTHERS.

MAY LOVE BE BORN ANEW IN OUR HEARTS SO THAT OUR LIVES WILL GLORIFY YOU. RECEIVE, WE PRAY OUR THANKS AND PRAISE.

AND AS YOU HAVE GIVEN TO US, SO NOW AND ALWAYS MAY WE SHARE YOUR GIFT OF LOVE WITH A WORLD IN NEED. IN THE NAME OF JESUS, YOUR SON-OUR SAVIOR WE PRAY. AMEN

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