

December 11, 2016: Singing the Story of Christmas: Love Came Down at Christmas

There is such a power and beauty in music and song, that it is no wonder we use them so often in worship as a means of connecting with God. Somewhere between the notes and the words, there is something deeply spiritual happening, by which we are opened to the divine presence. Our beloved Christmas carols are no exception, which is why we are focusing in on one each week as we prepare our hearts for Christmas. Over the past two weeks, we have dug into "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" and "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear," learning more about their authorship and context, applying their meaning to our lives and faith today. This morning we move to one of my favorites, "Love Came Down at Christmas." While this is not a wide-known favorite of many, it is a beautiful carol with simple, yet rich imagery.

Sometimes it is the power of the tune that makes a song so impactful – the way the progression of notes tugs at your heart and draws up an emotional response. Other times, it's the words of a song – the beautiful and lyrical poetry, or the unfiltered truth – that cuts straight to the heart. Have you ever found yourself humming along to a beloved tune, but either don't know the words, or have never really paid much attention to them – and then one day you really listen, and you're like, "oh, that's what that song's about?" Or when you simply put up with a tune, because the words of the song are just too perfect. At my wedding, the song I chose for the father/daughter dance was "I Hope You Dance" by Lee Ann Womack. If you know that song, you know the tune is a bit pop/country sounding – and my dad HATES country music... so we start dancing and he says to me, "eechk! You chose a country song?" I just smiled and said, "listen to the words." After only one verse, he conceded.

This carol is kind of like that. The tune doesn't hold anything special or heart grabbing, but it's the words, the simple truth and beauty in them that captivates the heart and mind, and even calls for a response. In a book called "The Christmas Carol Reader", William Studwell describes the poem as "simple, direct and sincere" and notes that it is a rare example of a carol which has overcome the disadvantage of "not having a tune (or two or three) which has caught the imagination of holiday audiences."

The poem's author, Christina Georgina Rossetti lived in Victorian England in the mid-1800's. She was a very well-known poet in her day, coming from a family of artists and writers and poets. Throughout her life, she authored three collections of mostly religious poetry and four devotional books. Rossetti's best-known hymns are the carols "In the Bleak Midwinter" (1872) and "Love Came Down at Christmas," first published in 1885 within *Time Flies: a Reading Diary*, as her entry for Dec. 29.

While the first stanza of "In the Bleak Midwinter" paints a vivid picture of an unwelcoming and desolate landscape—a symbolic representation of the state of the world encountered by the incarnate God— "Love Came Down at Christmas" presents an inviting image of incarnate "Love" descending to Earth, heralded by "star and angels." If you count the word "lovely," "Love" is mentioned 12 times in three short verses. Its repetition is modeled after the scripture it is based on – 1 John 4:7-11, a passage that

mentions "love" in some form 11 times. Through its simple words and repetition, we are reminded that at its very core, Christmas is a love story between God and humanity.

*Love came down at Christmas, Love all lovely, love divine;
Love was born at Christmas, Stars 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.*

The first verse lays out the image of the extravagant love of God being showered down upon us at Christmas, heralded by stars and angels.

The second verse moves into our response to this great love – WORSHIP. We gather to worship and praise God for this gift of love in our lives. But the last phrase of that second verse makes me think more deeply about the kind of worship Rossetti is referring to.

When I say worship, what kinds of images come to mind first? Music, prayer, sanctuaries and church buildings, sermons, and scriptures... Yes, but there's more. That last phrase, "But wherewith for sacred sign" while confusing at first is asking how our worship points others to God. You see, in verse 1, the angel and the star are the signs of God's love coming down at Christmas – the star for the wise men and the angels for the shepherds. It was these signs that lead them to discover the Christ child and celebrate God's love come to live among us. In verse 2, we're challenged to see how our worship can become a sign for someone else to discover for themselves God's love poured into their lives. Worship is not something we do for one hour once a week; worship can be a way of life, always praising God, always listening for God's word, and being called to respond in action.

Verse three begins answering the question left hanging at the end of verse 2. Where is the sacred sign of your worship? LOVE – Love shall be your token, love be yours and love be mine. Love to God and all, love for plea and gift and sign. Love is our response to the extravagant love of God that came down at Christmas. Love is the sign that we offer to others to show that Christ has come. When people can see us giving of ourselves, sacrificing, extravagantly loving others, that's when they see God, and that's when they see what love looks like. We are the sign that points the way to the love that came down at Christmas.

You know sometimes we make it more complicated than it is. At Christmas we're all frantically trying to find the perfect gift to express our love for other people. Sometimes what love looks like for another person, is simply taking the time to listen to them. It may not be a new shirt, or socks, or a tie, or gloves. It's usually something else. We've all heard the saying, "It's the thought that counts", especially when we receive a really strange gift. We recognize that the motivation behind the gift is often more important than the gift itself. When our motivations slip into simply checking names off our "need to buy for" list, rather than expressing love, then we're in trouble.

Today and next Sunday we have the opportunity to get and give different kinds of gifts for our loved ones, gifts that keep on giving (for a variety of people) long after they're opened on Christmas day. Each year our Outreach committee selects a few mission and ministry opportunities to which you can donate in honor of a loved one. You're invited to stop by the Advent Options table in Fellowship Hall this week or next to choose a gift that not only demonstrates your love for your family member or friend, but also your love for God. Through a donation to the Heifer Project, UMCOR International Hurricane relief fund, or Monmouth Daycare you will continue to live as a sign, pointing the way to God's love in this Christmas season, a living reminder that love came down at Christmas, and continues to shine into our world still today.

Each of these Advent Options offers a way to participate in the life giving gift of God's love this Christmas. Whether you choose to participate in this initiative or not, make sure you take time to gift your love to your family and friends, but also to neighbors and strangers alike. Let your love reflect back God's gift given to us, in this season, and all year long!

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