



Love Came Down

TEXT
Philippians 2:5–11

December 24, 2016 — Christmas Eve — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

This is the night of the story. This is the night where all of our attempts to explain it fall flat — not because they are wrong, but because they are too small. It is the night that calls into question our skepticism, because this night invites us to trust that the love that makes us human has come to us.

The only way to come to the truth of this night is to trust the story.

The story is so ordinary it is told every day: a pregnant woman, a nervous man, great anxiety when you realize you know diddly squat about being a parent. But then there is a soft cry, a first breath drawn in, and whispered words: “It’s all right, little one.” It’s all right now. A child is born. Remarkable ... and remarkably ordinary.

It’s a story so common it has been told in various circles about each one of you. While you might not ever think about it, when you were born, those who loved you told the story. They told of how you came early. It was a hard labor, you had a full head of hair or no hair, and you were a miracle. When babies are born, we have to tell the story.

We do the same tonight. This is a story of a child born of woman like every child, and yet a child born of God Spirit as was no other child.

There were angels there, messengers sent to reveal news so good they sang at the top of their halos. There were unexpected visits — not from aunts and uncles or Joseph’s co-workers, but from complete strangers. Shepherds came, singing angel songs. Magi, from faraway lands, came bringing gifts that you would only give a king.

You would think such a miracle child would be celebrated far and wide, but honestly, he found no welcome here. He slept, as much as babies sleep, in a manger. He was passed by by many and feared by a few, but mostly, he was ignored.

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This night raises questions; at least at some point in our lives it does. How could this be

possible? I was captured by that question for a while.

We live on this side of the enlightenment which taught us that science would answer everything, that human reason would name all truth. It took us a while to recognize that such claims were just another way of saying the human brain is God.

So we wondered, how could this story be true? It doesn’t make sense that God would take on flesh. How do we explain it? It’s a good question to grapple with. And doing so may bring you to other questions, or it may just leave you wrapped in skepticism. But if you live there long enough to realize skepticism just leaves you empty, then pack up your questions and bring them once again to the story.

And then be sure you ask the biggest question of all: not *how*, but *why*? Why did God choose this? Why would the creator of the universe, who lives beyond time and place, choose to be a human being? Why would God’s Spirit choose to experience fatigue and battle the flu, to know loneliness and what it is to have a broken heart?

Why did God do this?

Paul says it is because God is humble. *He humbled himself. He emptied himself ... being*

born in human likeness. Humility is not the first adjective we might choose to describe God, but it's one that Paul insists is essential. Christ humbled himself to become like you and me.

Have you ever humbled yourself? It's not fun.

When I was in seminary, I served a church in Virginia as a part-time director of Youth Ministry. That youth group, like ours, took a ski trip every January. So I went along. Of course, I had never skied before. I grew up in Georgia. We only ski on water, and never in January.

When I checked in, they told me that ski school would be available for beginners. This sounded like a good idea. But Patrick Newman, an eighth-grader, said to me, "Tom, Tom, Tom ... really, Tom, ski school?"

I said, "What?"

He said, "Tom, ski school is for losers. You will embarrass our entire group if you go to ski school." Here I am feeling peer pressure from an eighth-grader.

"But Patrick," I said, "I have never skied."

He said, "There's nothing to it, Tom. Just ride the lift to the top and come back down; it's natural." That's what he told me.

I looked on the mountain, and people seemed to be at ease with it. Little kids were skiing without any poles. I thought, "How hard can this be?"

He took me to the ski lift. You know, getting on that thing is not as easy as it looks. They don't stop the lift. It just scoops you up. I tried to get on the ski lift, but just as the chair was nearing, I turned to see when to

sit down. When I turned ... how do I say this ... it put parts of me just a bit wide. The next thing I knew, it had knocked me over, and I was face first in the snow. The guy running the lift threw the switch. It stopped the chair — but not just my chair. Oh no, it stopped everyone on the lift. Of course when he did, everyone on the lift turned around to see this guy from Georgia face down in the snow. I stood up, dusted myself off and climbed into the ski lift. He threw the switch again and we were off.

There was a young woman seated next to me, and she asked, "Do you ski often?"

I said, "You will never believe it, but this is my first time."

She said, "Well, pay attention; getting off the lift is not quite as easy as getting on."

"Oh?"

She said, "You want to keep your ski tips up. You will feel the ground, and when you do, stand up. You will ski away."

"Got it," I said. Sure enough, I had my ski tips up. I felt the ground. But I wanted to be sure it was time to stand up. I turned to ask the young woman, "Do I stand up now?" But she was gone. Then all of a sudden I felt the ski lift begin to turn around. Have you ever ridden one of those lifts down the mountain?

"How you doing? Good to see you."

"Forgot my hat." It's embarrassing.

You know when you are put in a position to declare to all around that you don't know what you are doing, that you are not skilled, you can't compete,

you are not enough, it's humiliating.

So here's the thing: Sometimes we think humility is thinking less of ourselves. But that's not what Paul is saying. Christ's humility results not from how he sees himself, but from how he sees you.

When I was in ninth grade, the guy who played catcher for the Atlanta Braves lived in our basement for the last two months of the season. When you are in ninth grade and you have a major league ball player in the basement, the second coming of Jesus would be anticlimactic!

One night, after listening to the game on the radio, a little sports car pulled into the driveway at about midnight. Johnny Oates got out of his car. No glove ... no uniform ... no cleats ... absolutely nothing to let my neighbors know that a major league ballplayer was in my driveway.

We sat at the kitchen table and ate a piece of pie. I asked him about the game. I asked him what it was like to play on the same team with Hank Aaron. It was a magical night — until my dad turned into *my dad*. He said, "John, you know Tom is quite a ballplayer." I thought, "Ohhhh, Dad." "He and Joe Barnes turned a double play last week in church league softball."

"Dad," I said, "stop! He's not impressed with church league softball, although, a double play is pretty rare. But it's not like he's going to want to see me take ground balls. Just stop talking, Dad."

Here's the funny thing. Had anyone else been at that midnight table, I would have been happy to fill in the details on that double play. Do you want to ...? No, sorry. So why not then? I didn't want to talk about it that night because I was humbled. I was humbled not because I felt inadequate or unimportant. I was humbled because I saw something greater in him.

Humility does not result from how we see ourselves, but rather from how we see others.

If I understand the text, it proclaims that Christ was born because Christ sees beauty, value, worth in you. He sees a greatness in you. That's not only why he came. There's no way he could stay away.

That's how God sees us. What is harder to explain is why it's so difficult for us to see the same in ourselves or in one another. The world seems to celebrate lack and meanness and hatred. But that is not what God sees.

My friend Tom Long once told a story about a man he saw carrying his wife across the threshold. Tom was driving by when he glimpsed this homecoming, maybe from a wedding. At first glance, it looked like they were taking a cheerful step. The man was happily carrying his wife across the threshold. But the traffic stopped, and Tom had a longer look. They were both graying, much older than he first thought. And then Tom saw the wheelchair from which, clearly, the man had just lifted her. This wasn't a first easy step across the threshold. It was per-

haps the thousandth hard step.¹

Who knows what others might see in this wheelchair-bound woman — if they saw her at all. But no doubt she was carried by one who still knew she was beautiful. He could do nothing else.

Christ humbled himself because of what he sees in you. And because of that, he just couldn't stay away.

This is the night of the story. This is the night where all of our attempts to explain it fall flat — not because they are wrong, but because they are too small. It is also a night that calls into question our skepticism, because this night invites us to trust that love that makes us human has come down.

Because of what Christ sees in us, he could not help but come.

¹I am grateful to Chandler Stokes, who shared this story in his sermon preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Grand Rapids, MI, "Imagination & Love," October 30, 2016.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.