

Well, as has been said a few times now, Merry Christmas! This is the fourth week of Advent, and some of you have been asking why we are having two different services on Christmas. It's because to observe Advent, you allocate the first four Sundays prior to Christmas. Then, that fifth service, Christmas Eve, is when we light the center candle, the white candle, the Christ candle, which represents the arrival of God. Because Advent is about expectation, it's about waiting, it's about longing for something that isn't. It's about anticipating this promise of the Messiah, this promise of the King Jesus' arrival.

Throughout this series, we've been looking at the classic themes of Advent—faith, hope, peace, joy—now we arrive at the theme of love. I want to reflect on that theme, but before we do, I want to do a little bit of a thought experiment.

Read this simple statement. "The meaning of life is love." Now, I would guess in 2023, almost 2024, in an area like the Bay Area, that the overwhelming majority of you all, and even those outside the walls, would agree with that statement—the meaning of life is love. It's one of the things that, in a polarized world in which we seem so distraught about so many different things, still persists: the idea that love is the meaning of life, the center of life.

It's fascinating because even if you're here and you are not a follower of Jesus, which we're grateful you're here to spend this morning with us, I would guess you still agree with that statement. That there's something about this idea of love that transcends more than just a religious understanding.

If I were to poll all of you asking exactly what love means and what that expression means in its nuance, we'd probably have more opinions than there are people in this room. Because the reality is love is a contested word, what does this exactly mean? I'm an academic at heart, and so us academics, we love to nuance. We never really want to accept anything 100 percent. We want to fine-tune it just a little bit. But the reality is that the meaning of life is love is something that none of us in here would truly argue about.

Now, my question this morning isn't that. Why would we argue with that? My question is, why? Why, in a polarized world, do all of us agree that this concept of love, whether you're a follower of Jesus or not, persists? That we all just accept this sort of *carte blanche*? What is it about this idea? Why across time, across thinking, across people groups, and across worldviews has this concept of the meaning of life being love persisted?

Well, let's do a quick survey of maybe the other influences or worldviews and see if we can determine where this derived from. Let's begin with a sort of Darwinian humanist approach. Right, a Darwinian approach certainly wouldn't center on love. It would center strength, the survival of the fittest. Love in a Darwinian worldview would actually be more of a bug than it is a feature because if you are loving, that tends to mean that you have to subject yourself beneath others. You're serving others. So love, in a Darwinian view, really doesn't make sense. I don't think that's where we derive this concept that love is the center of life.

Think of a more strictly political worldview or a Nietzschean worldview. Nietzsche looks at the world through the lens of power and says, "No, the strong are the ones that survive." Life is about gaining power, gaining influence, and the one who has the most power, they are the one. That's what life is about. Certainly, that seems contrary to love. That seems the other end of the spectrum for it.

Think of someone in the psychological realm like Freud. Freud would view the center of life as happiness or the pleasure principle. You are to do and exist for what feels good, and maybe this idea of love could be a veneer to bring you to happiness, but it's certainly not the center. The center is your own pleasure, your own experience of joy.

Think of Eastern religions like Buddhism and Confucianism, others that would look at life and think through the lens more of detachment from desire so that you don't have to experience the dissonance when those desires are unfulfilled.

Where does this idea that love is the center of meaning come from? Where does it transcend? I would submit, and this probably isn't a shock to you, but I would submit that this comes actually from the story of Jesus. It comes from the story of God. It comes more specifically through the story of Christmas. This idea that love, that God himself is embodied in a human form, enters into the story. See, I believe that the reason this persists is because the influence of the Christmas story, the influence of the Jesus story, has saturated our minds in such a way that we can't shake the indelible imprint it's placed on us.

Love is the center of meaning, and I think that holds true when you look through the Christian world lens. This Christmas story is a wildly paradoxical story. It subverts all those other ways in which we interpret reality because Jesus, this God figure, is one who enters in through the vulnerability of childhood. It's through the vulnerability of something like a person, a God born

in human flesh, in an obscure corner of this powerful Roman Empire that was filled and riddled with war and violence. Advent is this lens through which we look at the world and remember that love came down and entered into our world.

As I mentioned before, we have a thousand different ideas of what love means and how that plays itself out. And so it would behoove us to look at the Christmas story, to look at the Jesus story, and consider what love actually looks like. Advent provides a language for that. Advent is about the story of God entering into a broken world of war and of violence. It's an expectation, but it's not the same expectation as your children are feeling today when they get to rip open presents tomorrow. Similar, but it's adjacent.

Advent is about the expectation of sorrow. It's a sorrowful expectation. Because if you're longing for love, that means you don't have love. If you're longing for peace, it means you live in a world where peace isn't present. Advent looks directly at the shadows; in some ways, it looks through the shadows of life and at the light that is breaking in, which means the shadows exist, which is why we've been calling this Advent series The Undoing. We believe Advent is about the story of God undoing all of these counter-themes to the themes of Advent.

We look at the brokenness of something like a world that's been war-torn and riddled with pain and all of that, and we long for peace because we have strife. We long for love because it seems like God is apathetic, distant, and gone. Advent doesn't skirt the realities of the world. Advent is, in fact, the vocabulary, the language, and the story that we walk through year after year. Because you and I experience the dissonance of what should be, and we know the world is broken.

Yet what we know is true is our hope in Jesus. And it's in that tension, the overlap of Jesus having come 2,000 years ago and yet not fully come in the future when he returns and establishes the kingdom. We live in this overlap of two realities. One where sin and death are still present, but Paul would say that old world, that thing is dying off, that's old creation. The other is the new creation. You feel the tension, the dissonance, where you feel the joy that bubbles up in your heart in this season as you look at Christmas lights and eat good meals and drink good wine and open good presents.

You hold both of those in tension. It's shadow and light, apathy and love, strife and peace, and despair and hope. Advent is about living in that tension, but what Advent offers is instead of just parties, which again are a good thing, but instead of just parties, we look at the injustice of the world and cry out for God. Instead of just the glitz of lights, although those are good things, we look for the light that breaks into the darkness. Instead of Mariah Carey songs, which may be good, we sing hymns like, "Long lay the world in sin and error pining." A little later in that

same hymn, "Chains shall he break, For the slave is our brother. And his name, all oppression shall cease."

See, Advent is the story in which we enter into the brokenness of the world. You do not have to check that brokenness at the door. We bring it in full view of the hope of Christmas, of the hope of the arrival of Jesus, who says that love is the center of the world.

Consider the New Testament teaching. There's a scene in Matthew 22 in which a religious leader comes to Jesus and questions him about what he had just said. What is the center of meaning? And he comes to Jesus and asks of all the commandments, of all the prophets of old, on top of that, Jesus, what is the one central thing? And Jesus, brilliantly, like a good preacher, can't quite answer with just one thing. He gives two things. And you're familiar with this, but this is what he says in Matthew 22:37-40.

**Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." Matthew 22:37-40**

When Jesus is asked what's the one thing, he says the one thing on which the whole thing hangs is love. Love of God and love of neighbor. Of which Jesus is the perfect embodiment—both of love of God and love of neighbor. The center of the story is love.

Think a little bit later, this is Paul in 1 Corinthians and the New Testament writers, and one way you can think of everything outside of the gospels is they're trying to put the pieces together. Jesus' arrival into human history caused such a ripple effect that the rest of the Bible is trying to make sense of how profound the incarnation of Jesus is.

So, Paul in 1 Corinthians is trying to wrestle through this. This is the famous wedding passage, which, for the record, is actually speaking about the love of God, not necessarily the couple, but that's okay. We're near that. And later at the end of it, after this beautiful extrapolation of what the love of God is like, it is patient, it is kind, it is long-suffering, all these beautiful things, he gets to this in 1 Corinthians 13:13. *"And now these three things remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love."*

For Jesus, the center of life is love. For Paul, the center of life is love. One more that you already heard through our Advent reading in 1 John, another disciple of Jesus trying to make sense of the reality of all that Jesus meant.

**This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 1 John 4:9-10**

See, throughout the story, the center is love. I would argue the reason that 99 percent of us all agree on that statement, believer

or not, is that this incarnation, this moment in which Jesus enters the story as a human child, has so radically shaped the world that it's still imprinted onto our very core. We all intuit that, yes, love is the center. Yeah, we may quibble over what it means and what it looks like, of course, but love is the center.

So, for the rest of our time, I want to explore this idea of love. It may seem odd that we're going to circle and pivot over to Psalm 100 because that doesn't seem like your classic Advent text. But what I want us to see in Psalm 100 is that this Psalm comes at the end of a block of Psalms that began in Psalm 95. They're all about the arrival of the King, the Messiah. They're all about looking forward and what would that response mean if the Messiah actually came. Psalm 100 is really a response or a reflection to the Messiah arriving. Two things come out of this Psalm. First, what love does God exhibit? We'll see that. And secondly, how should we then respond?

**Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Psalm 100:1-3**

See, the psalm opens with this declaration, "*Shout to the Lord, shout all of the earth, shout for joy.*" we're used to something like joy. "Joy to the world, the Lord has come." This seems a fitting response, but what I want you to notice is the way in which the author of this psalm extends or broadens the horizon of who is to shout for joy when he says, shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.

It's a sense where he's making a spatial claim. It's to extend to every corner of the world. It's all the way around the globe. This joy is to break out. Now again, ask the question, why? Why should all the earth respond? Well, that seems to match because what we proclaim is that Jesus is, in fact, Lord of all creation. And so a cosmic sovereign, a cosmic king, would necessitate a cosmic response and joy. So he says to shout for joy all the earth, everyone, all of creation, shout for joy.

It's an interesting word, this word worship. This can actually be translated as serve as well, which I think is a good, healthy reminder for us. When we come to worship here and listen, pray, sing, stand, sit, take communion, and greet one another, all of that is a service to the Lord. It is how we worship.

I'm reminded of Romans 12. Remember we studied that a few months ago. This idea of the renewing of the mind. It said to offer your body as a living sacrifice. This is your true and proper worship. See, the reason we gather is to serve the Lord through worship. And so we come before him offering our very selves to him. There's no divide between the words of worship and the work of worship, which we have to recall and keep at the front of our minds. And the text talks about how we worship or serve the Lord with gladness and with joyful songs.

There's something beautifully poetic about us singing together. I mean, can you think of another environment in which we collectively gather in crowds and sing together? I think the only one I can think of is the 7th inning stretch, which, if you're a baseball fan like me, it's dark days right now, those darn Dodgers, but nonetheless, we'll gather at the 7th inning stretch, and sing, but there's not much else where we gather to sing.

There's something profound about a group gathering and singing, proclaiming, worship, singing songs, and gathering. The author says, shout for joy, come with joyful songs. And then, in verse 3, it uses this word, know. "*Know that the Lord is God.*" Now, the word "know" is the Hebrew word *yada*. And it means more than just head knowledge. We flatten this idea of knowledge and think of acquiring more information. That's not what the Hebrew imagination envisions. The Hebrew imagination, when it talks about to know is relational. It's a relational dimension.

Know in the sense that, yes, I know a lot of facts about my wife, but I know her. There's something intangible I can't quite grasp that I know about her. It's a connection, a way in which we know one another. And the invitation is to know that the Lord is God. You are invited into a relationship with this divine being. You are invited to know at a relational dynamic.

Many of us are caught up in acquiring more information about God. My prayer for you in this Advent season is that you experience the love of God. Not that you just know about it. Again, this is one of those seasons. I grew up in church. If you're younger in here, I was you once. I sat in the pew year after year. I became familiar with the stories over and over again.

We know the stories, but for some of us, we have to move from acquiring information to knowing. God did not come in the form of a human to offer more facts about himself. He came to be known. He came to enter into the relationship. And you see this in two dimensions. The psalmist again, in verse 3, says that God is our creator. He says it is he who made us. We are his. We belong to God.

Then he uses this other metaphor that we are the sheep of his pasture. And I love this imagery because God as a shepherd is one of humble appeal. He doesn't say, "I am the king above all, and so I'm there distant, looking down on everyone else." It's an intimate one. The image of a shepherd is one who walks with his sheep, his flock. He walks with us. He protects us. He guides us. He knows us. He pursues. He says that we are the sheep of his pasture.

And so God is the Creator. He's this Shepherd. He's worthy of the whole earth crying out to him. But again, what king is this? If this is, in fact, true of God, well, it would make sense that we want to understand what is the characteristic of this God. Look down in verse 4 as the psalmist will propel us to worship more, but we're getting closer to the God this is.

**Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations. Psalm 100:4-5**

See, the psalmist writes, *“Enter his gates with thanksgiving.”* It’s a sense in which you are not only just known by God; you’re invited into the core reality of God. This imagery of gates would have drawn the imagery of the Tabernacle in which you enter into the presence of God. This is the invitation. Remember, the Tabernacle in the Old Testament was where the presence of God dwelt as Israel was wandering around the wilderness. They would land for a season and set up this tent as the visible presence of God.

So when the psalmist says, *“Enter his gates with thanksgiving,”* he’s not just saying, come drop into this campus and walk through the parking lot with thanksgiving. Although, do that as well, by the way. But he’s saying to come into the very presence of God. And when you are there, you enter with thanksgiving, a gratitude that swells up. We forget how profoundly mysterious is the reality of God welcoming you in. What a gift it is that we enter his gates with thanksgiving. We run through his courts with praise. Give thanks and praise his name.

Then we get to verse 5. *“For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.”* And verse 5 is really where the whole psalm has been pointing towards. It’s the climax of what the psalmist is writing. And you see that in just this first word—for. Meaning, in light of all that I’ve said before this, *“For the Lord is good.”* So why do we enter his gates? Because the Lord is good, and his love endures forever. Why do we shout for joy all the earth? Because the Lord is good, and his love endures forever.

This phrase, this idea of goodness and the love enduring forever, is a unique phrase that’s meant to be emphatic. It drives this imagery that God is both dependable and solid. He’s merciful. He’s consistent. That relational dynamic of knowing God is not one that we have to question. It carries on. It is stable. It is solid. It endures.

He says we enter his courts with praise. We shout for joy because the Lord is good, and his love endures forever. But then note the last line. *“His faithfulness continues through all generations.”* Now remember the way the psalmist opened this in verse one, he talked about broadening our horizon in a spatial sense that all the earth is meant to shout for joy. That’s the opening line.

But the bottom line isn’t about a spatial broadening. It’s about a time broadening through all generations. It’s through all of time and through all of space. This God is worthy of worship in every dimension. I mean, it’s the psalmist quite literally saying any corner of the created world at any given moment, we are called to sing for the Lord because his love endures forever.

Love is the center of who God is. Love is the core of what it means for God to exist in the world. And he says because of that, his love endures forever. We shout for joy. We enter his courts. We light candles; we sing songs; we open presents; we laugh; we enjoy the company of one another; we rustle through the shadows; we look at the darkness of the world because we believe and hold to that anchor that love endures forever. Love endures forever.

Well, as I talked about at the opening, I know there are many of us in here in which you hear a sermon like this, you read a psalm like Psalm 100, and you’re just thinking, “I don’t have it in me today.” Advent is about the tension. And you hear this familiar word, shout for joy, and you’re thinking that you just got dragged here. You don’t want to be here. You’re just stuck. Or maybe you showed up because that’s what you do on Christmas Eve. But the reality is you live in that tension.

You hear this idea that God is love, and you realize you don’t know that. God seems distant. Your life doesn’t seem to be the product of a God who is loving. In fact, you pray for this or for that, and it seems like it falls on deaf ears. Like, is God just indifferent towards me? Is he apathetic towards me? We keep preaching about this God is love, but you’re wondering when you will see it manifest in your life? I don’t think there are words I could offer. If you are in that broken place, which I know many of you are, it’s a season that carries a lot of hurt. There’s nothing I can say to heal that.

But all I want to do this morning is just remind you of the story. And you’ll be familiar with it; it’ll feel trite. But sit with it. Love, in the embodiment of God, came down. He didn’t have to experience what he did, but this God took on the frailty of human flesh, the frailty of a baby, in which he felt pain. He cried out. That night was not all that silent. He longed for connection with Mary and Joseph. He was fearful; he was vulnerable; he had to be fed. I don’t know if they had diapers, but something there had to be taken care of. God chose to dwell in the vulnerability of a child.

All I want you to note is that whatever vulnerability and frailty you’re feeling this season, God has felt that. Jesus has felt that. He’s felt that concern, that fear, that anxiety. He’s felt pain. He’s felt hurt. He’s felt abandonment. He’s felt the tension of a life in a world that isn’t the way it should be.

I was reminded of the Romanian-born American writer, professor, and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel. He once said,

**The opposite of love is not hate; it’s indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness; it’s indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy; it’s indifference. And the opposite of life is not death; it’s indifference. Wiesel**

I appreciate his perspective because what he’s saying is that there’s a deeper pain than something like hate; it’s indifference. And many of us feel that in our relationship with the Lord.

You feel an indifference, an apathy in which you just wonder, "God, where are you"? Do you even care? I might submit that this feeling stings a little bit deeper than maybe even something like hatred. Because you're left alone, you're left wondering; you don't know the result of that.

But here's the beauty of the Christmas story, and I know you know where I'm going with this, is that the Christmas story is one in which it looks indifference in the eyes and God says, "I will not be indifferent to you. I will not be indifferent to a world that's broken. I will enter into that. I will move closer."

You can see the Advent of love is the undoing of apathy. And for many of you, you may want to feel that connection with God. I want to invite you to recognize that the love of God endures forever. That he is your Creator; he is your Shepherd, that he has entered into the story, and that apathy you feel from God, that distance that you feel, that is a very real thing I don't diminish. But I want to remind you this is not the resting place of God. God is, in fact, present, even if you don't feel it.

For 400 years before the New Testament began, God was silent to the people of Israel. They were left wondering, where is this King? Where is this Messiah? The world is waiting; it's longing for someone to come. God, where are you? You promised this. For years and for four centuries, they didn't hear a thing from God until that morning when it seemed like the sky had ripped open, and those shepherds out on the field began to hear the news that a King was born, and the thrill of hope, of potential liberation, of maybe this is the one.

I'm caught in this sinful world. I'm caught under the brokenness of a Roman Empire that rules with violence and oppression. And maybe this is the king who leads us out of this. That thrill of hope began to pulse through their veins because the Advent of love is the undoing of apathy. That question of where God is was answered that night for the shepherds. He's coming. He's here. He's in Bethlehem. As paradoxical as it can be, God is present.

## Love Shows Up

I'm going to close with three simple points that I think we see in this psalm that I want you to walk out with, and it's this. The first, love shows up. You see that in God. Love shows up. Notice again, it's verse 3. "*Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his. We are his people, the sheep of his pasture.*" A shepherd is not distant and removed. A shepherd is ever present with the flock. He is walking with it. It's present. Love shows up.

## Love Endures

Secondly, what is love? Love endures. I've already talked a little bit about that, but I want to pause and just consider in a world of disposability in which everything seems transient. Nothing really has staying power. Love endures through all generations. Love shows up in space and time, and love endures through all of

time. Love endures. "Shout for the Lord all the earth, for the Lord is good, and his love endures forever."

## God is Love

Then lastly, and most importantly, is that God is love. What is the center of all the created order? It is God. Who, from what we understand in Christian theology, is love. Not is loving. It's an important difference. God is love. The essence of God is love. So, therefore, wherever God shows up, love has arrived. However God speaks, love is there. God is love. Listen to these words from 1 John 4:16. "*And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.*" Now, again, this can be a complicated idea. We like the idea. In English, it sounds better to say God is loving. It alleviates the dissonance in your ears when I say something like God is love.

God is love. And so, what do we mean by that? Well, consider the very essence of God. The essence of God is three persons in one being. It's God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, which means that the very existence of God is actually community. Those three beings, God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit coexisting as one God.

And in that relationship, they are always loving one another. There is no hierarchy in the person of God. God the Father is not higher than God the Son, nor higher than God the Spirit. But rather, these three exist in this sort of mutual self-sacrificial loving in which they both elevate and love the other.

So God the Father is loving God the Son and God the Spirit. God the Son is loving God the Father and God the Spirit, and God the Spirit is loving God the Father and God the Son. It's this eternal, existent being of love. And if, then, love is the very core identity of who God is, then that means, in a world in which we feel God is apathetic, if that God shows up, apathy cannot exist any longer because love is the opposite of apathy.

God is love. Whether we feel it or not, and I understand that you may be here and think it's a bunch of hogwash, I simply want to point to the story of Christmas and recognize that starting tonight, millions of people across the globe will respond to this day. Because the ripple effect of God, who is love, taking on human flesh, has radically transformed all of the created order through all generations.

Because the Advent of love is the undoing of apathy. One last quote to end, it's from Henry Nouwen, he says,

**The whole meaning of the Christian community lies in offering a space in which we wait for that which we have already seen. Christian community is the place where we keep the flame alive among us and take it seriously, so that it can grow and become stronger in us. In this way, we can live with courage, trusting that there is a spiritual power in us that allows us to live in the world without being seduced constantly by despair, lostness, and**

**darkness. That is how we dare to say that God is a God of love when we see hatred all around us. That is why we can claim that God is a God of life even when we see death and destruction and agony all around us. Nouwen**

Advent, Christmas, is the reminder that God is present and he is love. My prayer for you is that in the midst of whatever you're walking through, may you remember that love shows up. For many of you who feel like the story's old and it's trite, and you've heard it before, I pray that you remember that love endures. And lastly, I pray deeply that you and I would come to understand the profound mystery that God isn't just loving; he is love. And he came in this Christmas story for us to encounter the very being of love so we may know him. That's our story, and that's our hope this morning.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

© 2023 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA  
Catalog No. 1479-4FC

---

This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, December 24, 2023 at Central Peninsula Church.

**[www.cpc.org](http://www.cpc.org)**