

# Advent 2008 – Rethinking Christmas: Love

*Delivered by Associate Pastor Andrew Rock*

Pray

I hope you had a wonderful Thanksgiving. I love Thanksgiving and Christmas. They are filled with beautiful decorations, sparkling lights, fantastic food, parties with friends and family, our sacred traditions- it's a season of abundance.

- too much gravy this year

I love the stories of Christmas as well. Like Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street, It's a Wonderful Life, and even Scrooge. These classic stories all point to a deeper reality of Christmas, don't they?

I think they point to the necessity of love, to the importance of family, to the longing for meaningful relationships, to the need for hope. These classic stories illustrate the deeper cry of all our hearts. We cry for deep, meaningful connection with God and with each other. Are we loved? Can we love? Is there hope for a better tomorrow?

I hear this cry for love all the time during this time of year.

I listened to a friend last week talk about Christmas at home, about how her Dad always laments about the twice yearly obligatory call to the relatives, and about how sad that was for her. Where is the love?

Another friend told me the story of heading off to his parents house, piling the kids in the car, not really knowing if the tension between he and his parents would ease, if they could find a way to talk about the hard things that had happened and forgive. He said, 'When we came home, the car was so packed with toys that our parents had to mail the rest to our house, and nothing meaningful was talked about. In fact, my kids got so overwhelmed opening presents they asked if it could stop.' His cry was 'how can there be all these gifts and so little love?'

Our God is a God who hears our cries. And God chooses to respond to us with love. As we rethink Christmas together this year, I want to offer a different backdrop to the birth of Jesus than we normally hear. It's the backdrop found in the hymn 'O Come O Come Emmanuel'. Please turn with me to Exodus, chapter 19.

Theologians often refer to Exodus as the central story of Scripture. The of the writers of Hebrew Scriptures refer to God much more often as 'the God who brought you out of Egypt' (32) than they do to God as 'Creator' (6). As one author puts it, 'liberation of exiled creation is the central story of the Bible.'<sup>1</sup> And Exodus starts with God hearing the cries of His children, 'The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out...and God heard their groaning', and then God responds. God rescues the people, Pharaoh is defeated, and then God takes the people to Mt. Sinai and speaks to them all.

Exodus 19:4-6

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<sup>1</sup> Rob Bell, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, p 187.

4 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, 6 you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'

Let's unpack this.

4 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

God Rescues us out of **Grace and Love (repeat)** God chooses to love us first, to rescue us out of our misery, not by our effort, but because of God's love for us. Central!

5 Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.

Verse 5: Covenant is a marriage promise, God's promise to us is to love us to life, for new relationship, and to give us back our humanity. Remember, Israel were slaves and slavery produces a powerful lie of how you view yourself, so much so that many times we read in Exodus their desire to go back to Egypt. God says, stay in this **covenant of love**, be obedient, and remain engaged with me! Don't let obligation and doing something be your motivation for relationships- let it be love.

Although the whole earth is mine, 6 you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'

Priests? Priests mediate the divine. To mediate is to come between. A priest comes between people and a god or gods.

A priest shows you what his or her god is like. At a temple or shrine a priest will speak, perform, and you'll get a picture of what their god cares about. So when God invites the people to be priests, it's their invitation to be the physical bodies who show the world this God 'who brought you out of Egypt' is and what this God is like.<sup>2</sup> God asks, will you love others just like I have loved you? Will you show them my love?

This call to be priests was at the heart of the early church's self understanding. Jesus called them as disciples and sent them out as ambassadors, priests who tell & show the love of God in their living, moving, and being.

1 Peter 2:9-

9But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10Once you were not a people, but now you

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<sup>2</sup> Rob Bell, Jesus wants to Save Christians, p 28.

are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

So, let's recap. Here's the large brush strokes of Exodus 19:4-6

**God hears our cry**

**God rescues us because God loves us**

**We're called remain in God's covenant of Love**

**We then can choose to show God's love**

We're groaning inside to experience love, to be loved, to have someone to love, aren't we? Will we choose love? Or will we choose obligation?

Joseph and Mary were confronted with this choice many times.

Mary chose to love a child given to her by God, no matter if that cost her a marriage and the grief of watching her child suffer.

Joseph was leaning toward dealing with Mary and her pregnancy with the obligation of religious rules and cultural customs, but

when confronted by an angel Joseph chose to love Mary and the child growing within her.

The story of Jesus' birth is one calamity after the next, one tragedy after the next, one fearful moment after the next, and all the while God's presence is upon Joseph and Mary with visits from angels, miraculous provision, wise men bearing gifts, and angelic hosts singing praise. God rejoices when we choose love over obligation. In part, the miracle of Christ's birth is so many people choosing love rather than fear, tradition, custom, or obligation. That's because God chooses us in love, not in obligation. God wants a relationship with us borne from love, not out of religious duty or custom. Jesus did not come into this world so that we might pay our respects to him. Jesus came because he has heard our cry and provides himself as the remedy so that we might be filled with his love, his life, his peace, and his hope. God wants relationship with you, not your religiosity.

This call for love is at the heart of why Jesus is born to a family. It's the choice of Joseph and Mary to love each other and to love their son, Jesus, that is at the heart of God's call for all of us to love each other just like God loves us. The incarnation of God, in the person of Jesus, is anchored within the love of a family. And if you are married or have children or are in any kind of significant relationship you understand that you have to choose love for one another each and every day in order to experience the life, hope, and peace relationships can bring.

I so often forget this! It's infuriating at times. I will choose to make any activity in my life laden with so many burdens of obligation, expectation, and criticism. It's slavery to me. Once something in my life becomes an obligation I immediately become to dislike it. When I first arrived here I ran all the time along the bluff trails of Montana De Oro, watching ocean

waves crash against the shore and taking in the majesty of the hills. Then I stopped running, for many reasons, and in my head I still say, 'You should go running' and I am immediately repulsed by the very idea. And it's even more painful in relationships. There was a huge part of me stuck in grief for a long time over my son, Jonah, who has cerebral palsy. Jonah's limitations are far surpassed by his capabilities and gifts but I must confess that I thought he should be in a different place, thought that he ought to talk or walk or do anything sooner than he was, and so I was stuck in that grief. This last summer a friend told me about Jonah's patience, his obvious love for everyone he meets, his endurance, his commitment to work hard at physical therapy, his love for his brother, his gentleness, and his joy- and immediately my heart melted. I saw my son not for what he should do or might not ever do but for all the amazing gifts he had. My grief lifted, my joy returned, and I now I can rejoice at every moment I have with him now because I have chosen love rather than fear. Now how infuriating is that? It took me

three years to figure that out and when I told April, she said,  
'Yeah, I've always seen Jonah that way.'

You have a choice to move forward this year in all your Christmas traditions and festivities out of obligation or out of love. You have a choice to purchase gifts out of obligation or out of love. You have a choice to pray and worship this Christmas season out of obligation or out of love. You have a choice to interact with family and friends out of obligation or out of love.

My prayer for all of us is that we would choose love. So may you cry out to God and receive God's abundant love so clearly seen in Jesus, may you remain in God's love as you pray, worship, rest, and play, and then may you choose to love others with the love of Christ so that their cry for love would be answered.