

Scripture:

Isaiah 7:10-17

Matthew 1:18-25

“This is how love came down.”

The Bible is God’s love letter to humanity.

And Jesus is God’s gift of love to us.

God’s Word --- the Bible --- love ---- and God’s living Word --- Jesus Christ love.

That’s what the whole thing --- creation --- life ---- meaning in life ----- eternity --- are all about.

That’s what God is all about.

Love.

Intimate relationship --- covenant with the whole of His creation ---- especially us --- the apple of His eye.

But God’s love is a different kind of love than we often think of.

It’s not sentimentalized love --- “Oh look how cute she looks --- I just want to eat her all up.” ----- or ----- “I remember when...” followed by misty eyed far off look into the distance ----- or ----- “Look at that man pushing his daughter in the stroller --- isn’t that just beautiful.” ----- these are not what Gods’ love is all about.

And unfortunately Christmas is often reduced to this kind of sentimentalized love ----- most Christmas cards --- most Christmas songs --- many Christmas memories even --- are about sentimentalized love ---- even the way we read the Christmas story in scripture can become sentimentalized.

God’s love is not a sentimentalized love.

And it’s not saccharine love.

Saccharine love is a close second to sentimentalized love --- especially at Christmas.

Saccharine love --- like sentimentalized love ---- often finds expression in highly emotional and sweet little images or phrases --- things like -----
 “Love is like the ocean --- deep and wide.”

--- or ---

“Love is like a flower --- petals bursting forth with each new day.”

----- or ---

“Love is like a breeze --- refreshing and cool.”

----- or ----

“Love is like a circle ---- never ending or broken.”

--- and here’s a prime example of true saccharine love ---- going into the realm of the cheesy even

----- “Love is like a rubber band ---- held at both ends by two people --- when one leaves the other hurts.” ---- and there are many more --- I don’t think I’ve even come close to the best ones.

God’s love isn’t cheesy or sugary --- or saccharine love.

And God’s love isn’t just about preference or appetite.

“I just love it when someone scratches my back” --- or --- “I love it when someone bakes me a cake.” ---- especially chocolate right --- it’s always about the chocolate isn’t it ----- although lately I’d say vanilla cake is the way to go --- but that’s just me ----- or then there’s --- “I love cinnebuns.” --- - or --- “I love pecan pie.” ----- or whatever.

The love of preference or appetite --- as good as some of the joys of life can be ---- doesn’t ever approximate the depth of God’s love.

When we talk about the love of God ----- we’re talking about something far more compelling and binding ----- we’re talking about Emmanuel.

God with us --- not just a fleeting experience --- or short lived preference ---- or a beautiful string of words describing a feeling or sensation ----- but God with us all the time.

And it’s God with us all the time --- not because of what we have done --- but because of who God is.

Emmanuel isn't about ---- "I this." --- or --- "I that." ----- or even -----
 ----- "We this." --- or ---- "We that."

Emmanuel is God ----- and then us.

Emmanuel is God first ---- and then it's God with us.

One of the great tragedies of the church that the Reformation tried to address was the mistake of understanding God primarily as we see and experience Him in our lives.

Understanding God primarily as we see and experience Him in our lives.

As if He's only ever on the move when we notice it --- and when we notice it in our lives.

As if we are the centre around which God moves.

If we are truly open to God it's not about just seeing Him or experiencing Him in our lives.

If we are truly open to God ---- we see His fingerprints all over the world --- completely independent of us ----- and --- and this is really the key ----- He is the centre around which everything moves --- and lives and has its being.

We truly experience God's love when we experience ourselves in the life of God --- the movement of God ---- and not just God in our lives.

Emmanuel is God with us --- but Emmanuel is not about us in the centre and God flitting about on the outskirts.

Emmanuel ---- God with us --- isn't about God suddenly being with us --- as though He wasn't before.

Emmanuel --- God with us ---- is about us suddenly understanding and experiencing God differently --- it's about us feeling the warmth and love of God all around us all the time --- or at the very least being open to this.

Emmanuel is coming to understand and having experiences with God where we see ourselves fitting into a larger context and greater plan ----- our life is not the plan --- God's will is --- we are not the centre --- God is.

And so it's less about experiencing God in our lives --- us --- us --- us --- and more about experience our lives within God's life ----- Him --- Him --- Him.

There's a huge difference between God in our lives and us in God's life --- in one we are the centre ---- in the other God is.

Joseph in our reading today isn't all caught up in just His --- Josephs' life --- he very quickly comes to understand that what is happening goes way beyond just Joseph and Mary from Nazareth traveling to Bethlehem.

Emmanuel ---- the baby boy about to be born to Joseph and Mary ----- isn't really about to be born to them at all ---- instead he's about to be born for the whole world.

This event --- this birth --- is not about God coming into Mary and Joseph's lives --- it's about Mary and Joseph being invited into the life of God --- into God's great rescue plan.

And it's because of Jesus --- Emmanuel God being with Mary and Joseph like never before that allows them to see this --- and have their eyes opened up to this.

At first they are fearful --- because they think about themselves ---- me --- us --- my life --- our lives.

But very quickly they come to realize this isn't just about their lives at all --- there is far more on the line here ---- with this little baby --- this is about God's plan --- and not just the lives of 2 Hebrew young ins in the outback.

That's the whole point of the Christmas story --- Emmanuel God with us --- changing everything ---- and widening our range of vision beyond just ourselves – into this wonderful plan ----- a plan foretold --- see Isaiah today - ----there were all kinds of signs --- but finally it's God with us ---- here --- now.

Christmas is God with us.

Easter --- is God for us.

And Pentecost is God in us.

Christmas --- God with us --- Emmanuel --- the Christ child.

Easter --- God conquering sin and death ----- God for us.

And then Pentecost ----- God sending the Holy Spirit to dwell within us ----
God in us.

God with us ---- Christmas.

God for us ----- Easter.

God in us ----- Pentecost.

The Holy Trinity of the Church year.

God with us ----- for us ---- and in us.

Christmas --- Easter --- Pentecost.

It's all part of one great ---- "To be continued" story ---- the cradle --- to the
cross --- and so on --- "To be continued."

So Christmas ---- 7 more days until ---- Emmanuel ---- God with us ---
God's love coming down.

Sin ---- what is sin?

Sin is a breaking away from God.

Sin creates a chasm --- a gap --- a hole ---- a hindrance --- a distance ----
between us and God.

Sin in its simplest form is a distancing of us from God --- that's sin.

A brokenness ---- a gap ---- between us and God.

Us doing something other than God would desire of us --- that's sin.

And that's life --- we will always fall short --- and mess things up --- we will always sin.

This will never ever change until we meet Christ face to face ---- until then we sin --- and always will.

For some reason --- strange to me ---- many non-Christians struggle with this --- they think once you find Christ the sinning stops ---- and so they can't understand why we as Christians still make so many mistakes --- they hold us to a higher standard than we ever will ourselves at times ---- curious --- but for another day.

Emmanuel --- God with us.

And Emmanuel is God with us all the time.

In the backyard --- in the front yard --- in the side yard --- in the country -----
-- in the city --- in the garden ---- on the freeway and the highway ---- and
the driveway --- in the doctor's office ---- "You have cancer." ----- "You
have a tumour." ---- "You aren't going to make it."

We'll of course we aren't going to make it ----- none of us make it --- all of
our bodies will fail us --- that is a harsh reality of life this side of the grave.

But ----- Emmanuel ---- God with us.

And Emmanuel --- God with us --- when we hear bad news -- or final news.

And in the less dramatic and less defining moments ----- it's Emmanuel ---
God with us as well.

When we're sitting around at the mechanic's ----- anxious about the final bill
---- will a need a new car --- has this one finally kicked it?

When we smash up our car --- it's Emmanuel God with us.

And it's Emmanuel --- God with us when we wait in a very long line for coffee ----- just itching for our warm drink as the person at the counter decides to share the longest most irrelevant story ever with the clerk.

Emmanuel is God with us when we're in arrears and fall short at the end of the month ---- dipping into the overdraft --- again.

Emmanuel is God with us when we get a raise --- or a new job.

Emmanuel is God with us when we find love.

Emmanuel is God with us when we have a child ---- and should we lose a child literally --- and in other ways too.

Emmanuel is God with us all the time --- not just when we're good --- not just when things work out and all is well ----- Emmanuel is God with us when we're scared and frightened and unsure.

Emmanuel is God with us all the time.

And nothing can ever change Emmanuel --- or break the bond of Emmanuel.

Sin separates us from God ----- sin is always at its core a kind of separation from God.

Emmanuel ---- Jesus ----- reassures us that God is with us even as we are knee deep in sin --- even as we are living in this fallen world that is forever knee deep in sin.

To be in Christ is not to be free from sin.

We're all captive to sin --- Christian --- non-Christian --- atheist --- humanist ---- whatever "ist" or "ism" you like ---- or fancy yourself.

To be in Christ is to be free from sins grip --- not free from sin.

No one is free from sin --- the human condition by definition is corrupt and sinful --- and always will be --- at least until Christ comes again.

But the very the nature of God's love --- Emmanuel --- God with us --- is ---
 ----- yes the world will still be ugly ---- sin will still be there --- here ----
 everywhere ---- yes there will still be illness --- uncertainty ---- stress ----
 death ----- pain ---- suffering ----- but we have God with us.

In the midst of all of this ---- there is ---- Emmanuel.

Sin is here to stay right ----- don't expect things to suddenly get better ---
 until Christ comes again sin is here to stay --- we best get used to it.

But ---- and this is the key ----- so is Emmanuel.

God is here to stay as well.

And of course this is the grater truth --- God with us despite --- God with us
 no matter what --- God with us --- period.

That's Emanuel ---- God with us no matter what.

There are no conditions or expiry dates to Emmanuel.

There is a whole lot of foolishness in this world ---- and there are a whole lot
 of fools who buy into the nonsense that comes off as spiritual or helpful or
 ethical ---- or right.

Emmanuel ---- God with us --- God sending Jesus Christ --- is all about God
 being with us throughout our lives in this enemy occupied territory called
 earth.

Emmanuel is God with us until Christ comes again to reset the ledgers and
 restore justice --- and love --- and peace ---- Gods' will --- the kingdom of
 God.

Things had gotten so desperate --- and so twisted ---- and so foolish that God
 had to step down in Christ and remind us --- us --- humanity --- just how the
 story ends --- just what God intended from the beginning --- a heavenly -----
 free from sin --- pain --- evil --- despair --- suffering --- existence.

And so now --- here we all are ----- in the middle of it --- a kind of battle ground --- there's good and there's evil --- there's God and there's Satan ---- - and we're waiting.

And we're waiting.

And we're anticipating ---- and we're yearning.

We're longing.

Sometimes celebrating --- sometimes mourning ---- sometimes grieving.

Waiting for the beautiful triumphant ending ----- the final act ---- the second Advent.

The story of God --- as it stands today --- ends with ----- "To be continued."

God's love for us isn't finished yet.

We know all about the story up to this point --- the cradle --- the crèche ---- - -- the cross --- the resurrection --- the ascension --- the coming of the Spirit.

In a sense that's what the whole church year is all about --- re-living and re-creating --- and celebrating --- and marking --- all of the steps and stages of God's story so far.

That's what our little cradle to the cross --- and the circular journey here at the front ---- is all about.

Christmas isn't just an isolated event --- it is interwoven together with the cross and the resurrection --- Easter ----- and the ascension --- and Pentecost the Holy Spirit --- it's all interwoven together with God as the prime mover and architect.

God with us --- God for us --- God in us.

And it all ends with --- "To be continued..."

And it continues --- unfinished as it is --- it continues still today --- here and now ---- as we mark and celebrate and tell and re-tell the great love story that is God's will.

Emmanuel --- God with us --- to the end of the age --- and then some --- into a new age --- post resurrection --- post grave --- post human comprehension.

Emmanuel ---- God with us --- "To be continued."

In Matthew's gospel Joseph gives way to Emmanuel --- he doesn't question God ----- He follows Him --- gives way --- knows that he Joseph is a part of something far greater and bigger and more beautiful than just Himself.

Joseph knew the story was greater than Him --- Joseph knew the story was --
- Emmanuel ---- God with us --- and so he did the unthinkable --- he kept Mary --- and took her home as his wife --- as verse 21 says in Luke today ---
- and they had the Son --- and they named the Son as they were told to.

Joseph knew this story wasn't finished --- Joseph knew that this story was all about God --- God with us --- so He followed --- not relying on how he saw it --- but on how God planned it.

That's how God works --- beyond time and beyond space.

That's how love came down --- that's how love will come down again ----- inside our conceptions of time and space --- but also beyond them as well.

Anyone who thinks they can wrap their head around Christmas --- Easter --- Pentecost ---- God's will ---- is so full of themselves there's likely very little room for God to enter in.

God's story ----- God's love story is to be continued.

Love came down and told us ----showed us --- that there is far more than just meets the eye.

Christmas --- infant low infant mild --- is about far more than meets the eye --
-- at least a few people got it --- Mary --- Joseph ----- a couple of shepherds and a few wise men --- and Herod as well -- he knew something

extraordinary was happening here –too didn't he -- look at his reaction -----
 hunting down the Christ child to eliminate the threat.

But of course he failed --- “To be continued.”

Christmas is Emmanuel --- God with us like never before.

Look out world --- more than just a child was birthed in that stable.

A rescue plan ---- was also birthed.

Forget about the gifts this Christmas ---- forget about the memories and
 traditions ----- forget about all that our culture has made of Christmas ---
 except for the coming together part.

Because that's the part that matters --- the coming together part ----
 especially the coming together of God with us --- especially the coming
 together of God's plan.

This is how God came down ---- not just in a pillar of fire --- or cloud of
 smoke ---- not just in manna in the desert --- not just in a still small voice ---
 not just in some tablets --- or altered water movement ----- but in a person.

Christmas is God acting.

God coming.

God stepping down and initiating His great plan of salvation.

Christmas is love coming down like never before.

Anne Weems kind of captures this sentiment.

The last stanza of her poem ---- “O Lord, you were born!”
 Reads this way ----

O Lord, there just aren't enough choirboys to sing what I feel.
 There aren't enough trumpets to blow.
 O Lord, I want bells to peal!
 I want to dance in the streets of Bethlehem!

I want to sing with the heavenly host!
For unto us a Son was given
and he was called God With Us.
For those of us who believe,
the whole world is decorated in love.

Isn't that kind of it --- isn't that Christmas --- in a way.

“For those of us who believe the whole world is decorated in love.”
Christmas is God decorating the world in love.

It's God's love coming down --- it's God coming down like He never had
before.

Prepare Him room.

Amen.