

Hebrew Testament Reading *Isaiah 7:10-16*  
New Testament Reading *Matthew 1:18-25*

word count: 1,978

I love this story: A grade school class was putting on a Christmas play that included the story of Mary and Joseph coming to the inn. In that class was one little boy who wanted very much to be Joseph. But when the parts were handed out, his biggest rival was given the part, and he was assigned to be the innkeeper instead. He was really bitter about this.

So during all the rehearsals he kept plotting in his mind what he might do at the pageant in order to get even with his rival who was playing Joseph. Finally, the night of the performance, Mary and Joseph came walking across the stage. They knocked on the door of the inn, and the innkeeper opened the door and asked them gruffly what they wanted.

Joseph answered, “We’d like to have a room for the night.” Suddenly the inn-keeper threw the door open wide and said, “Great, come on in and I’ll give you the best room in the house.”

Silence. For a few seconds poor little Joseph didn’t know what to do. The audience didn’t move. All you could hear were the crickets. Finally, by thinking quickly on his feet, Joseph looked into the doorway past the innkeeper, cased the whole place and said, “No wife of *mine* is going to stay in a dump like this. Come on, Mary, let’s go find a *barn!*”

And once again the play was back on course.<sup>1</sup>

It is obvious that Joseph cared deeply for Mary. He would not have risked his own reputation and protected Mary’s if he did not. In the story, Joseph understood through the visitation of the angel in his dream that the directive from God to love, even in these circumstances, would bring him into a life of substance and character.

Joseph had every right to his doubts and his anger, but chose instead to take on the role of father willingly. He was changed as a result of loving when love was difficult, beyond the conventions of society, let alone the supernatural claims that he would live to examine.

Taking on the care and love of a woman like Mary at this time was an extraordinary leap of faith, given the circumstances. What does Joseph really fully believe or even comprehend about these circumstances? That the Messiah would come from here? They live in a fifth-rate burg called Nazareth. There are jokes about the place, and you have all heard one of the sayings of the day, “Can *anything* good come out of Nazareth?”

Are there any men here who could do what Joseph did? Because, put into today’s circumstances, this is like finding yourself hitched up to a teenager from Barstow who suddenly tells you after the fact that she is pregnant, but *don’t worry*, because she is still a virgin. *Somehow*, a white dove was involved. Not only that, but she tells you that you are going to help to raise the Messiah of the world, who is not your child, but God’s, and *of course* you know that the world is expecting the Messiah to be born and raised in Barstow. If you have any problem at all seeing yourself functioning within this scenario, then you can begin to understand what a truly exceptional man Joseph was.

Joseph exemplifies unconditional love. The love that Joseph gives, especially when all conventions of his day gave him the opportunity to walk away from as unbelievable a scenario as he was given, must have changed him. How has giving love when convention tells you that you don’t need to, changed your life?

There is a story about a teacher who was forever changed when she took the opportunity to show love to a child, and being that we have a lot of teachers and administrators with us, I thought I would share it with you today.

There was a young boy named Ted Stallard, who undoubtedly qualified as one of “the least among us.” He was turned off by school, very sloppy in appearance and expressionless. Even his

teacher, Miss Thompson, enjoyed bearing down her no-nonsense red pen, as she placed “X’s” beside his many wrong answers. If she had taken the time to study his records more carefully, she would have read:

1st grade: Ted shows promise with his work and attitude, but has a poor home situation.

2nd grade: Ted could do better. Mother seriously ill. Receives little help from home.

3rd grade: Ted is good boy but too serious. He is a slow learner. His mother died this year.

4th grade: Ted is very slow, but well behaved. His father shows no interest whatsoever.

Christmas arrived. The children piled elaborately wrapped gifts on their teacher’s desk, and Ted brought one too. It was wrapped in brown paper and held together with too much Scotch Tape. Miss Thompson opened each gift, and the children all wanted to watch. Out of Ted’s package fell a gaudy rhinestone bracelet, with some of the stones missing, and a bottle of cheap perfume that had been opened and somewhat used. The other kids thought it was funny, but she silenced them by splashing some of the perfume on her wrist, and letting them smell it. She put the bracelet on too.

At the day’s end, after the other children had left, Ted came by his teacher’s desk and said, “Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother. And the bracelet looks real pretty on you. I’m glad you like my presents.” He left.

When she was alone, the teacher felt much moved. She stopped and prayed that God would help her to change her attitude.

The next day, the kids were greeted by a reformed teacher—one committed to loving each of them. Especially the slow ones. Especially Ted. Surprisingly, or perhaps, not surprisingly, Ted began to show great improvement. He caught up with most of the students and even passed a few.

Time came and went. Miss Thompson heard nothing from Ted for a long time. Then, one day, she received this note:

Dear Miss Thompson: They just told me I will be graduating first in my class. I wanted you to be first to know. The university was not easy, but I liked it. Love, Ted.

And four years later:

Dear Miss Thompson: As of today, I am Theodore Stallard, M.D. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know. I am getting married next month, the 27<sup>th</sup> to be exact. I want you to come and sit where my mother would sit if she were alive. You are the only family I have now; Dad died last year.

Miss Thompson attended the wedding, and sat where Ted’s mother would have sat. The compassion and the love that she had shown that young man entitled her to that privilege.<sup>2</sup>

We could all have some real courage, and start giving to “one of the least of these” even when we feel that it isn’t required of us, as Joseph experienced. Love can change us, as it did Joseph, and as it ultimately changed our world.

Once, when a rabbi visited a monastery where there was a lot of in-fighting, he decided to tell the monks there that he had come searching for the Messiah, and he had found him there in that Monastery among them. Then he left without telling them who it was. Subsequently, the monks treated each other with the love and respect that they would want to receive themselves.

This year the Messiah is among us again, and in parts of the world that needs love the most. The Christmas season has brought us from talk about hope, peace and joy, to the love we associate with the season today. Where in our personal lives can love speak through us to change not only the recipient of our love, but strangely and inexplicably, us as well?

Joseph could barely have believed that the Messiah would be so intimately known by him. By raising, protecting, and loving this child, he was saying that yes, the Messiah is among us, perhaps even in this child. At this Christmas season, if the Messiah is among us, the obligation exists to treat each other as if the eyes we look into in every human contact were those of the Messiah. “That which you do unto the least of these you do unto me.”

We need Christmas this year to remind us. We need it to remind us of hope, of peace, of joy, and of course, of love. We need all the songs, all the tinsel, the candlelight reflections of faces gathered in worship and at home. We need the exchange of gifts, the cards from far away and the morning itself with its reminder that *something* happened in that starry, starry night that changed the world, and is with us in Spirit to help change us again in a new year bright with promise. And having been reminded of what is important to us, we might embrace a world where love is meant for everyone, measured not in sentiment but in deeds serious with the charge to build a more equitable society and to seek peace on earth.

So, how has giving love when convention tells you that you don't need to, changed your life? How will it change your life in the New Year, and will you let it?

Many years ago the Puritans thought that people were ruining Christmas with their pagan rituals. They especially objected to the fact that the holiday distracted people from the Lord's Day of Sunday.

But they did more than complain about it annually as we do. They took action. They got rid of Christmas altogether. In Puritan settlements across 17<sup>th</sup> century America a law was passed outlawing the celebration of Christmas. The marketplace was ordered to stay open for business as though it was no special occasion and all violators were prosecuted. The celebration was not referred to as Yuletide but as "fooltide."

It was against the law to make plum pudding on December 25th. (If you have ever tasted plum pudding, you might be all *for* the re-instatement of this law.)

And still, every year people talk about reforming Christmas, cleaning it up, getting it back to its original meaning. There will always be Puritans. A Puritan is "someone who is desperately afraid that somebody, somewhere, might be having a good time." Well, how far do we want to go? Do we want the season to be less full of the joy and the extraneous ritual that calls so many not of our own faith to observe it with us in their own way? Then will Christmas, as the Puritans thought, be saved from us and our sinful ways?

So what if we spend money on presents? Can you think of a better way of spending money than on gifts of love? And so what if all the lights and tinsel do create a fairy tale setting that soon disappears as does the so-called Christmas spirit. At least it lets us know, if only for a brief time, what life can be like if we only try.

So let the message ring out, not that we are destroying this holy day, but rather, that we can never destroy this day. Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be for all generations.

In the poetry of Ann Weems:

The Christmas Spirit

is that hope

which tenaciously clings

to the hearts of the faithful

and announces

in the face

of any Herod the world can produce

and all the inn doors slammed in our faces

and all the dark nights of our souls

that with God

all things still are possible,

that even now

unto us

a child is born.

Merry Christmas.

***Sermon Resources:***

1. Adapted from a story by John Simmons.
2. Jon Johnston, "Courage - You Can Stand Strong in the Face of Fear," 1990, SP Publications, pp. 111-113.

**Scripture for Sunday, December 23, 2007  
"Love" Fourth Sunday in Advent**

**Isaiah 7:10-16**

Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

**Matthew 1:18-25**

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.