



A young family was in the car driving to their family's Christmas gathering. One child kept talking about all the toys he would receive. The older sister blurted out, "You know, Christmas is not just about toys. It's about love." "And presents!" her younger brother chimed back in. "No," the older sister said, "It's just about love." "OK," said the younger brother, "I LOVE presents!"

It's important to know what kind of LOVE Christ will bring. The Bible speaks of "love" over 600 times. There are many different kinds of love. There is *eros* love, which is the physical kind of love. There is *phileo*, which is a friend-to-friend kind of connection. Then there is *agape* love, the highest form of love – that special kind of love that is self-giving. It is the kind of love that puts the needs of others before one's own needs. *Agape* love always concerns itself with the well-being others, no matter what the cost.

*Agape* love is the driving force behind the entire biblical story. The well-known John 3:16 Bible passage makes this clear: "For God so loved the world that he gave his own Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life." For God so loved (*so agaped*) the world. It is because God chose to love the world unconditionally that we have reason to gather in this place and anxiously awaiting the arrival of the birth of Christ. Love will be God's sole motivator to become human and live among us.

Christians often misinterpret the word "so" in the John 3:16 passage. For God *so* loved the world. It doesn't mean, "God loved the world *so* much." What the Greek text actually means is that God loved the world *in this way*, or *in this manner*. God loved the world in such a way that he was willing to sacrifice his very own Son so that our sins would be forgiven and the promise of eternal life would be ours.

The "so" in John 3:16 describes the self-less, unconditional, *agape* kind of love God offers us. It is because of the unconditional love God has for us that God will choose to come to earth in the person of Jesus Christ.

When we gather on Christmas Eve to celebrate the birth of Christ, we will be able to emphatically say, "Love has come." By gazing at the Christ child, we will see none other than God himself. We will see love in the flesh.

To experience firsthand the love of God, we simply must hang around with Jesus, watch him in action, follow his lead, receive what he has to offer. Because Jesus is God's own Son, to be in the presence of Jesus is to experience the love of the Father.

When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, he didn't hesitate at all: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and love your neighbor in the same way. Jesus modeled for us what loving God looks like by focusing on worship, prayer, and total obedience to God's commands in daily life. That is what it means to fully love God.

Loving our neighbor means that we are to show the same kind of love to others that God first showed to us – a forgiving, gracious, generous kind of love. The only way we are able to love others in that way is because we have experienced firsthand that kind of love from God.

Love, however, is much more than how God treats us. Love is who God is. In other words, it is impossible for God not to love, because love is God's very nature. Love is the main descriptor of God in the Bible. God is love, 1 John declares. God is the source of all love. Love is the driving force of all God has done and continues to do in the world.

When God creates, God creates out of love. When God saves, God saves out of love. When God convicts us, God does so because he loves us. To let us continue in our own destructive ways is the most unloving thing God could do. And so God calls us to repentance, to return to his ways that lead to life.

The incredible love of God will fully manifest itself through the birth of Jesus. From the very beginning, God said to his chosen people, "I will be your God and you will be my people." Even when the Israelites rebelled against God, God's love did not waver. God chose to be patient and forgiving. God remained faithful to them and chose to continue to love them despite their rebellion. Why? Because it is God's very nature to love. "I choose love," God tells us. "I can do no other."

All of us who have been claimed as God's own children in the waters of Holy Baptism have direct access to God's amazing love. God promises to love us no matter what. Our past, our foolish ways, our stubbornness, even death -- nothing in all of creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God. God's love for us is greater than all things. God's love will have the last word.

So for God's people – for us – love is a given. It is guaranteed by God. No strings attached; no small print. That is the good news of Christmas. God has taken matters into his own hands. We need not try to earn God's love. We simply need to accept the gift of love that God will present to us through the birth of his Son, Jesus.

Love has come, the Christmas hymn assures us. Love will indeed come. We will recognize it because it will be beautifully wrapped, snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.

Because we in our sinfulness could never find a way to make our way up to God, God in his divine goodness and mercy will come down to us. Through the Christ child, God will embrace us, redeem us, and claim us as his very own.

As Jesus is born on earth, we will never again have to question God's love for us. God will prove his love by taking on flesh and living among us.

And as baby Jesus grows up, God will once again prove his love for us. God will offer his sinless Son upon the cross for sinners like you and me so that our rebellion and brokenness will no longer separate us from God's mercy and grace. "For God so loved the world..." that God stopped at nothing to ensure that nothing will ever separate us from God. The Bible assures us that not even death can separate us from God's love because Christ will conquer the powers of sin and death by rising from the grave. God will have the last word. That is the power of God's love. God's love for us will never end.

As Jesus is born among us, he will indeed bring with him incredible gifts from heaven – the gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love. More valuable, more precious than the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh that the Wise Men will offer Jesus is the gift Jesus will offer us – his very life.

Jesus will offer us his very life in hopes that we would be inspired to shine hope, peace, joy and love in our daily lives. The light of Christ that was given to us the day we were baptized equips us to lead others to the manger, to behold the Word made flesh, Emmanuel, God with us.

Through the birth of Christ, all of our hopes and dreams will be fulfilled. Love will come, and it will be enough.

Come, Lord Jesus, come. Amen.