



Our Advent series *beloved* is about focusing on the greatest love story ever told, the love of God for us, His creation. God loved us so much that He sent His Son to suffer and die on our behalf. Christmas is a celebration of the beginning of that story. The Book Song of Songs captures the deep passion of those yoked in marriage, but it's also a metaphor for Jesus Christ and His bride, the church. Song of Songs 2:16 says, "My beloved is mine and I am His." That is how Jesus feels about us. God is coming over the hills to reach you, to save you, to bring you home...and to call you His *beloved*.

I'M COMING TO YOU • Matthew 1:18-25 • John Goodale • November 27, 2016

In 20 days and 9 hours, our son Matthew will be getting married. It may seem silly to mention the number of hours—but I guarantee you that he and his fiancé Meghan are counting down every moment until December 17. For more than three months, prior to their wedding, these two have been separated by 2500 miles, one in New Jersey and the other in Washington. They've seen each other only once during this time—so they have a deep longing for the day when they'll be together with the one they love.

We observe a similar longing in our earlier reading from Song of Songs 2:8-13. These verses tell us of one pursuing his beloved, wanting to be with the one he loves. So we find him crossing mountains and hills, bridging the distance between him and his beloved. We see in this passage a love so great, he'll do whatever it takes to be together.

Our Advent series "Beloved" points us to God's own love, and longing to be with His people. Jesus is our beloved, and we are His. The bad news is that we're separated from Him by so much more than the miles separating my son and his fiancé. The good news: Jesus loves us more than we even imagine; knowing we're unable to come to Him, Jesus has come to us.

Our Beloved's coming is beautifully described in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Each begins to tell another love story, between a young couple named Mary and Joseph. Their love story was suddenly interrupted by a bigger love story of God and His people. Luke tells us of Mary's response to this interruption, and we just read of Joseph's in Matthew 1:18-25.

Within today's passage is a remarkable promise from the prophecy of Isaiah: "'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' which means, 'God with us.'" (Mt. 1:23) God with us. God with us! Don't miss the significance of these words; allow them to settle deep in your heart and mind. During His ministry on earth, Jesus described our relationship in terms of a bride and groom. Protestant reformer and theologian Martin Luther sought to explain the depth of our Beloved's love for and commitment to us by writing: "Human marriages

are but poor examples of this one true marriage."

Do you realize how much God longs to be with you? Can you hear God's love for you, His beloved, in the story of Christmas? This love for you and me compelled Him to come to us; to be with us. It was an extraordinary action, fueled by the extraordinary love of our Beloved, who couldn't stand to be apart from us.

The word Advent comes from the Latin *adventus*, which means "the approach" or "the arrival." Author Walter Wangerin notes that the verb is *advenio*, meaning "I arrive. I come. I am coming." During the season of Advent, we celebrate that our Beloved has come to us to save us. Love prompted Jesus to take on our frail form, and enter the world in the same way each of us do, as a baby. During Advent, we also anticipate the day when our Beloved will return again, and save us completely.

Today's candle is Faith, which plays an essential role in both our celebration of Christ's coming and our anticipation of His return. Joseph's story in Matthew reveals a beautiful connection between faith and action. There was surely so much he still didn't understand after the angel's words. But in faith, he reversed his decision to divorce Mary from their engagement vows. In faith, Joseph took on the responsibility and stigma of this baby as his own. In faith, he responded to God's invitation to participate in the love story He was writing. In the same way, our faith in what God has done and will yet do propels us through the season of Advent. It leads us to experience and rejoice in the love of our Beloved.

Our passage in Song of Songs describes a love-driven pursuit. Twice we hear the pursuer's invitation to his beloved: "come with me" (Song of Songs 2:10, 13). We then find him awaiting his beloved's response to this invitation. These verses echo our Beloved's invitation to be with Him, even as He has come to be with us. He awaits our finding ways to say yes to God's own pursuit of us.

Traditionally, Advent is a time of preparation, so we can be responsive to our Beloved's coming. I love the way Bobby Gross puts it: "Advent is a

season in which we practice waiting; we wait for the coming of God. We need Him to come. Our world is messed up and we are messed up. We lament our condition and long for God to set things right, to make us better. So we pray and watch for signs of His presence. We do all we know to do so that we are open and ready."

I've journeyed through this season a number of times. Too often in the past, I didn't feel ready to celebrate this incredible thing God has done until Christmas Day was nearly over. Now each year, my desire for Advent is the same: that my heart and mind will be touched anew in some way by the truth of God's love and what He's done--and that this will result in a response of awe and worship God is so deserving of.

How does this happen for any of us? How can we be responsive to and prepare this season for our Beloved's initiative in our lives? Let me offer three thoughts to help us live into this wonderful truth of God with us.

First, **remember you are God's beloved.** Our roles in life cannot help but influence how we view ourselves. My self-perception is shaped by who I am as pastor, husband, and father. Those are all wonderfully life-giving roles for me. However, what if I saw myself not through the lens of vocation, family, or accomplishments, but primarily as God's beloved? That's a truth that won't change with a bad day! I will always be loved by God. I encourage you to remember each day of Advent that you are God's beloved. Perhaps leave notes where you'll find them, declaring, "I am God's beloved!" Or, place these reminders where family and friends will find them.

Second, **look for signs of God with us.** "God with us" doesn't point only to Jesus' long ago arrival; He's with us in all moments of all days. Our challenge is to catch glimpses of our Beloved's presence, in ways that will encourage and strengthen us. Ruth Haley Barton says, "Advent is a season for waking up to all the ways Christ comes to us."

Verse 9 of our Song of Songs passage describes barriers between the pursuer and his beloved: a wall, window, and lattice. Our Beloved has broken

down barriers to be with us--but there are barriers we need to overcome if we're going to recognize His presence. Barriers of busyness. Barriers of distraction from other interests. Barriers of self-sufficiency. Let me encourage you to look each day of Advent for God with you, and allow this awareness to prompt greater intentionality in being with Him.

Finally, **cultivate a longing for your Beloved.** The Christmas season can be filled with various longings. We long to find the right Christmas gifts. We long to be with our loved ones. We may long for traditions or times of Christmas past. And let's be honest: there may be moments when we long just to get through this season!

Advent is an opportunity to elevate our longing: to grow our desire for Jesus, as we await His coming; to think about our Beloved; to express our love for Him; and to listen for His quiet expressions of love to us. We do this by worshiping together each Sunday during Advent, by reading and re-reading the Christmas story or our First Pres Advent devotionals, or by building quiet and stillness into this busy season, when we can ponder this love relationship God has initiated. As we make our way through Advent, look for ways to cultivate a greater longing for Jesus.

I began by telling you of my son's love for his fiancé. We've also read today of love stories in Song of Songs and in Matthew. All of these help us better understand the biggest love story of all, between God and us, His beloved. So perhaps it's appropriate that we conclude with one more love story.

Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard once told of a great king who found himself with a dilemma. He had fallen in love with one of his subjects, a peasant girl, and didn't know how to express his love to her. He knew he could have her brought to his palace, have a crown placed on her head, and ask her to be his wife—and she couldn't refuse. But the king realized he would never know if she was his wife out of love or because of his power. He also knew he could be taken in his carriage to her humble cottage, and there announce his love for her in

her familiar surroundings—but he realized that even this would feel overwhelming, and that she couldn't respond to him as equals.

The king thought, day after day, until he finally decided upon the only solution he could come up with. He would step down from his throne, live in her environment, and become just like her. Only in this way, he realized, could he adequately profess his love for her, and seek to win her love for him.

Friends, this is exactly what our Beloved has done for us! He left the majesty of heaven and entered our humble world to help us better understand His love for us and respond in kind. For we are God's beloved, and He is ours.

This Advent season, remember that you are God's beloved. Look for glimpses of God with you. And cultivate a greater love for Jesus. Amen.

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STUDY GUIDE

"I'm Coming to You"

Matthew 1:18-25 and Song of Songs 2:8-13

Start It

- "All You Need is Love" was a hit song by the Beatles. Estimate for a moment what percentage of all the songs you've listened to during your lifetime have been on the subject of love. Chances are, it's most of them! That's because love is such an important, longed-for quality in all of our lives. Think about the people who have loved you in years past, as well as those who currently love you. What a difference their love has probably made in your life! During this season of Advent, we want to consider God's deep love for us. For we are God's beloved, and He has gone to great lengths to express His love to us.

Study It

- Read Matthew 1:18-25, then take 5 minutes to ponder what "God with us" (verse 23) means.
- Ruth Haley Barton writes, "Advent is a season for waking up to all the ways Christ comes to us." In what ways can you identify glimpses of God with us? How can you more intentionally seek to be with Him?
- Read Song of Songs 2:8-13. Note the movement of this person towards his beloved, crossing mountains and hills, bridging the distance between him and her. Now imagine Jesus doing the same, traveling from heaven to earth in His great love for you. How easy or difficult is it for you to consider yourself God's beloved—and why do you think that is?
- Notice the multiple invitations to the beloved: "come with me" (Song of Songs 2:10, 13). The pursuer awaits his beloved's response, and this passage ends before we see what it will be. This invitation echoes our Beloved's invitation to respond to His pursuit of us. What are ways you can say yes this Advent season to God's initiative to be with you?
- In Song of Songs 2:9, a wall, windows and lattice are barriers between the beloved and her pursuer. Our Beloved has broken down barriers to be with us. What barriers do you need to overcome, that may prevent you during Advent from better recognizing God with us?

Pray It

O Holy God, you are my Beloved, and I am yours. Give me the ability this Advent season to recognize your presence. Help me remember each day that I am your beloved. Guide me in cultivating a deeper longing for you. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Live It

Remember each day that you are God's beloved!