



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*.

BELOVED • Luke 2:4-14 • Tim McConnell • Dec. 24, 2016

Merry Christmas! What a night to lift a light in a darkened and cold world. We light such a light tonight for the glory of the name of Jesus—we might never be the same again. “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.” (Isaiah 9:2) Some things we see change us. I’m always moved by the collections of the year’s photographs. USA Today does one, and Time does top 100 images of the year. Many of them tragic; many profoundly beautiful. But some things you see change you forever. Tonight, if you see the light of Christ and catch a glimpse of the glory of God, let it shape you. We are here to be made different.

The McConnells spent Thanksgiving in Lancaster, PA, with Abigail’s family. It’s a tradition to go to Fulton Theater, a small restored theater in town, to enjoy whatever musical they have going. This year it was *Beauty and the Beast*. “Tale as old as time...” Maybe you know the story. A selfish prince is cursed and turned into a beast. But not only is he cursed, the whole castle and all its servants are cursed and turned into objects; a clock, a candlestick, a teapot... every knife and fork and plate. They are all locked into this terrible fate. So they do what any reasonable group of people would when cursed and imprisoned in despair—they come up with carefully choreographed musical numbers, and break into song! No, it was a great show. I really did enjoy it. But here’s the point. The beast had to do two things to break the curse. He had to love somebody and get them to love him. He had to learn to love; and he had to learn to be loved. If he does that, the curse, the isolation, the despair, the hopelessness all disappears. And not only for him, but if he can love, and if he can be loved, all the people around him get to be human again. If you can learn to love, and if you can learn to be loved—it doesn’t just come down to you—everybody around you gets to be a little more human.

But that’s just fantasy. I want to shift from myth to reality now. About 2016 years ago, give or take, a very real baby was born to a virgin mother, Mary. In a real town called Bethlehem outside

of a real city called Jerusalem—and we all know just where that is. It’s not a myth or a legend we mark tonight, no “once upon a time” here. This is an event that changed the world and reshaped human history because that particular baby was God’s only begotten Son. That baby was more than just a human being, it was God in the flesh coming into the world to restore what was rotten, to recapture what was drifting away, to save the world He had made. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” (John 3:16-17)

We have been looking at the Christmas story under the theme “Beloved” all this month. God called Jesus His beloved Son when he was baptized: “and a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.’” (Luke 3:22) Pretty gushy for a divine All-powerful Father, don’t you think? Every parent knows how that feels, looking down at your child whether at birth or adoption or some moment—your heart just bursts. Beloved. But God’s beloved was sent on a mission. God’s beloved, Jesus, comes to us when we can’t get to Him. “I’m coming to save!” He says. Across an infinite distance.

This Beloved will make all things right. Jesus has authority to set things right in this world and in our hearts. This Beloved cannot be stopped—this is not some cold, emotionless errand. Jesus comes with passion to seek and to save the lost, and nobody can stop His love. You can kill Jesus; He still loves you. I heard recently of David Wilkerson, the courageous pastor who went into gang ministry in New York City to reach those kids for Christ. A gang leader named Nicky Cruz pulled a knife and threatened to kill him, and Wilkerson said, “You could cut me in a thousand pieces and lay them out in the street and every piece would love you.” That’s how Jesus comes; with courage and passion. Nothing can stop His love. This Beloved brings forgiveness and restoration. Jesus is not just a forgiver, but a redeemer, a powerful liberator sent to bring us from

imprisonment to spiritual darkness into His kingdom of everlasting light. Tonight we get to see the whole thing, the whole story, the whole arc of history, the whole plan of salvation narrowed down to a child—an infant in a cradle, crying in the night. God's Beloved Son has come to claim you. God so loved the world, God so loved you, that He sent His Son to break the curse, to make you human again. And from the cradle the same question comes: Can you love? And can you be loved?

It was such a monumental event, the birth of Jesus, we still count our calendars from it. We still come out to church in the cold of night for it. We still drag pine trees into our home, and hang socks from our fireplace mantels, and jingle bells, and deck halls, and dash through snow and sing with Bing Crosby—all because of this. "So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them." (Luke 2:4-7) That's it. That's how it happened. That's how God entered the world. Tale as old as time—but this is a real baby, a real mother, a real change, a real hope.

Nearby were shepherds – not hard to believe. Bethlehem was where sacrificial lambs were born, perfect and without blemish. "An angel of the Lord appeared to them." That's a little harder to believe. I've never seen an angel myself, but I'm not such a cold intellectual as to disbelieve the possibility. I've seen some weird things! "An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified." (Luke 2:9) That's easy to believe! I'd be terrified too. "But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.'" (Luke 2:10-11) The Beloved of God is born.

Now we get to the heart of the message. The angel said, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news, of great joy, for all people." Good news. Great joy. For all people. Yes. First, good news. Some use the word "evangelical" like it's a voting bloc. "Evangel" means good news. This is an evangelical church; it means we are people of the good news. The angel said to the shepherds, "Don't be afraid, I've come to 'good news' you. I've come to evangelize you." That's literally what the angel said! I have come to tell you the good news, and if you know it you'll be changed. Friends, what happened when Jesus was born was good news. The message of Christmas isn't good advice about what you might do. The message of Christmas isn't a good appeal about what you should do. The message of Christmas is good news of what God has done. Celebrate it again tonight in such a way that you believe beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the birth of Jesus is good news, not only for the world, but for you.

And what is the good news? What's so great about Jesus being born? Let me summarize it for you. There is a God, and this God made us to be in a joyful and loving relationship with Him. But we turned away from God and our relationship got strained; beyond strained, it got broken. All of a sudden we were children of God estranged from our own father, lost and alone in the cosmos. And this brought in death. When you break your relationship with your parents, the allowance stops. When you break your relationship with the Author of Life, death comes—lifelessness. When you turn from the light of the sun, you walk into shadows and darkness. "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23) Sin earns death like a paycheck, and you can see it at work in the world. But God didn't want to see it, God didn't want us to walk into darkness, God didn't want us to go our own way into our own destruction, so God sent His Son. That's the good news. God sent His Son Jesus, and being a man without sin, Jesus was able to take the death we deserved on the cross; and being God, Jesus was able to escape the bonds of death; and being our Savior, Jesus is able to bring anyone who will call on His name out of darkness, out of confusion, out of the cold, out of despair, and into the light of

life that you may proclaim the excellence of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. If you see the light of the glory of God tonight, don't turn away. Good news.

Good news of great joy, the angel said. Great joy. Joy! Did you ever think that God cares about your joy? "Great joy," the angel said. He didn't have to. He could have been like the prison guard walking down the hall knocking his truncheon along the bars, slipping his key into your door and opening it, "Hey, 22357, boss says you're free. Get out." The angel could have said, "Good news. Jesus saves you from your sins. Move along." No! Great joy. Great celebration. Not only are you free from the penalty of your own sins, but you are called into eternal life, thick, joyful, overflowing, gladsome, happy, eternal life with Jesus! Great joy.

Good news. Great joy. For all people. The birth of Jesus was not just for Israelites. It was not just for Europeans. He's for all people. Abigail and I will go with the team to Egypt in a few weeks, and it is an honor to stand with the Christians of Egypt at this time. Every time I get around Christians in another culture, I'm amazed. Particularly with the children. It astounds me. They know Jesus! They know the same Jesus I know, the same Jesus my children know. They have seen Him, I can tell. They have the same joy in their eye, the same song in their heart. They know Jesus! Only they know Him in Farsi. They know Him in Arabic. Jesus speaks to them in Swahili, and Cantonese, and Russian, and French—or even with a British accent! Jesus is good news, great joy, for all people.

But one last thing. If Jesus is for all people, don't you know that means Jesus is for you? If you see the light of Christ. Open your heart to receive. Jesus is good news, of great joy, for you. Jesus the Beloved has come, and in Him you are accepted, you are loved, you are redeemed, you are saved and you are again the beloved child of God. Tale as old as time. Shun God. Shun your spouse. Shun those around you. Become the beast. Or...or learn to love and learn to be loved in Christ, and you and all around you get to be human again. Here is your gift. He is Christ the

Savior. Here is your blessing – it is God as a little child come to set you free. Here He is lying in the manger. You've come for the baby Jesus—it's the whole of Jesus you need. You've come for Christmas, but it's Christ you need. Christ has come on a mission of love; through many perils and at great sacrifice He has come to you. This is the Christ. This is your Lord and Savior. Love and be loved—beloved.

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