

## Love Came Down in Bethlehem

\*\* Matthew 11: 1 - 6

\*\* Do you remember what it was like to be a kid at Christmas time? We who are parents (and grandparents) get to relive some of those magical memories through the eyes of the young ones in our families, but its difficult to recapture the almost palpable excitement of Christmas Eve night, and early morning that kids experience. They bounce off the walls, they don't want to sleep... (and at the same time mom and dad really want them to go to bed *early*, you know, there's Santa stuff to do!) And, some of us can remember that pre-dawn pitter patter of footsteps outside your bedroom door, the giggles... the "Can we go downstairs now?" [They have no idea that all mom and dad want to do is make sure the coffee pot gets turned on, because we've had about 3 hours of sleep!]

Back before the days of the Internet, cable TV with endless advertisements aimed at children, the beginning of that slow burn of "Christmas spirit" – something that would grow and grow - culminating on Dec 25 – was not Thanksgiving Day, as it is today, but I think you can make a case that the beginning of Christmas was when the Sears Catalogue Wish Book was delivered.

\*\*How many of you remember either yourself or your kids pouring through that book, circling or dog-earing pages, or compiling your Christmas list? I went right to the electric train and racing car pages... and dreamed of what it must be like to have one of those *big* sets, side by side racing... well, one Christmas I found out. It was Dianna's and my first Christmas together, we were living in a one room efficiency apt, (College housing), and Dianna bought me a set of electric racing cars that took up our entire floor. (How cool is that? So what that I was 21 years old and a newly married college senior about to start seminary!)

Quite a few of those toys in that Wish Book, from cars, to dolls, to other gadgets, when you would read the fine print, you'd often see this: "*requires 2, 4, 8 'D' batteries... not included*". Back before the 'age of disclaimers' that we're in now, they didn't always feel to need to inform you of that, and so there were thousands of kids who experienced this:

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\*\* the “Christmas Day batteries not included blues”. And, of course, nothing was open for you to hurriedly buy a pack, and if they were open, they were out.

Well, we all know that to make anything go, you need a power source. Toys need batteries, or a plug in power pack... but in Life – bigger picture – we find ourselves in a constant quest for power too. The ability to accomplish things, to *do* things, to somehow *matter* - it all requires power.

One of the most counter-cultural parts of the message of the Good News of Jesus Christ (the Gospel), one of those things that so many in the world find just too hard to accept, so hard that they reject the whole package, (and so many go to such great lengths to make sure that everybody knows that they’ve rejected this world-view), is this constant stumbling block message of the prophets and the Gospel writers, and Jesus himself...

\*\* “We are looking for power in the wrong places!”

James W. Moore, in a book that many of you are reading ([Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam](#)) writes about this in this week’s chapter, well worth a read. He says that the real source power in this world is the power of love.

He quotes the French priest and philosopher (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin)

\*\*Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire.”

Love is the most powerful force on the face of the earth – more powerful than fame, more powerful than force (human strength), and it is certainly more power than money. These are the three main avenues that people in our world today (even as in Biblical days) seek power. And all of these buy a form of power, to be sure!

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Famous people do what they want, it seems. People with a lot of money control pretty much everything on this earth (it's the god of this earth)... and everybody knows that those with the biggest guns usually win the battles. (In the words of our new Philadelphia football coach, Chip Kelly, football boils down to ""Big people beat up little people." That's earthly power, and it works in football. And if you're not a big person... you watch it on TV.

The Bible never says that these forms of power are impotent, or that they don't matter in the world. What it does say – and this is the message of Christmas – is that these temporary forms of power pale in comparison to the Power of Love. Neither money, nor brute force, nor fame can change a person's heart for the good. But love can. And when love is in control of our fame, our force, our money... change not only happens, but it lasts.

In the Scripture we just read, we hear the followers of John the Baptist (the second 'Elijah' sent to prepare the way for the coming Messiah, and who is now in prison) going to Jesus, and they ask him a question on John's behalf. "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Now, we need to realize that the motivation for this question kind of boils down to the fact that this Jesus was not displaying the *form* of power that they expected of a Messiah! He wasn't overthrowing governments, wasn't planning a revolution... what gives? Jesus' answer to them puts his finger on the source of *real power*:

*\*\* "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor."*

Moore writes: "Now, what did Jesus mean by that? Jesus meant that he had not chosen the way of might or power or wrath, but the way of love. He had chosen to bring the Kingdom with love because he knew that love is the most powerful force in the world."

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A man named John Marks, is a producer for the television show 60 Minutes. (This was reported by Philip Yancey.) Marks went on a two-year quest to investigate evangelical Christians, the group he had grown up among and later rejected. He wrote a book about the quest called Reasons to Believe: One Man's Journey Among the Evangelicals and the Faith He Left Behind.

In the spirit of Jesus' response to the question of John's disciples, John Marks says that the Church's response to Hurricane Katrina turned the corner for him and became a key reason to believe. He reported items like this: One Baptist church in Baton Rouge fed 16,000 people a day for weeks; another housed 700 homeless evacuees.

*Years* after the hurricane, and long after federal assistance had dried up, a network of churches in surrounding states were still sending regular teams to help rebuild houses. (Many of these were UMCOR teams!) Most impressively to Marks, all these church efforts crossed racial lines and similar barriers in the Deep South. As one worker told him, "We had whites, blacks, Hispanics, Vietnamese, good old Cajun... We just tried to say, hey, let's help people. This is our state. We'll let everybody else sort out that other stuff. We've got to cook some rice."

Marks concludes:

"I would argue that this was a watershed moment in the history of American Christianity ... nothing spoke more eloquently to believers, and to nonbelievers who were paying attention, than the success of a population of believing volunteers measured against the massive and near-total collapse of secular government efforts. The storm laid bare an unmistakable truth. More and more Christians have decided that the only way to reconquer America is through service. The faith no longer travels by the word. It moves by the deed.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Yancey, *The Question That Never Goes Away* (Creative Trust Digital, Kindle Edition, 2013)

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We recently talked about that, and you know that I believe it travels by *both* word and deed. You can't have one without the other. But this is a powerful observation – what the massive efforts of Federal and local governments, with huge amounts of money could not accomplish, some Christians did... motivated by the power of love.

We sent a number of teams to the Gulf coast - all the way from NJ. One of our member (Doug Sell) spent a month down there, organizing volunteers. We're seeing the same things happen on the Jersey coast... where a large percentage of the rebuilding effort (especially for those who are poor, disabled, and have special needs) is being accomplished by Christians – again motivated by the power of love. We sent over \$14,000 to that fund in the past year including an offering a couple of weeks ago, hopefully that will grow, and we're also participating in the effort to send work teams (which are now forming.)

God's plan, from the beginning of time, God's plan to rescue a lost people was to come among us and live. To be "Immanuel" (God with us.) And, you see, when we show real Love – through deeds, words, genuine praise, worship, heartfelt prayer, sacrificial giving, etc. – we are allowing God to have a place in our lives, and the end result is that we *become* the Incarnation in this world. **We** are the body of Christ... when we love as God loves us.

Paco Amodar, a pastor in Little Village on Chicago's west side, lives in a neighborhood rife with gang violence. He told this story about being invited to lead a prayer vigil for a young man who had been gunned down by a rival gang.

"When I arrived at the vigil, a large crowd of young people—including many known gang members—had already gathered around the sidewalk where I would be praying. I wondered, What should I do? What should I say? I felt fearful and inadequate. Yet I also knew that they had gathered for this prayer vigil. So amid my fears, I prayed silently, "Jesus, what do you want me to do here?"

"As I looked out over the crowd, I realized most of these scary-looking gang members were just kids, mostly in their mid or late teens, with some in their twenties. I was old enough to

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be their father. They had surely been told repeatedly by authority figures how wrong their actions were and how foolish gang activity was. But as I looked at these hurting teenagers, I wondered, What would Jesus say to these young people?

"So I asked permission to speak from my heart. Then I said, "Since most of you are half my age, I am the age of your fathers. Would you allow me to address you on behalf of your fathers? I know you have heard plenty of times that this back and forth violence in our neighborhood is complete nonsense. You've been told how destructive gang behavior is. But today, on behalf of your dads, I want to say to you what should have been said a long time ago. My son, my daughter, would you forgive me for not being there for you when you were little? Will you forgive me for not being there when you took your first steps? Will you forgive me for not being there to play catch with you when you were young? Will you forgive me for leaving you when you most needed me?"

"As the words poured from my lips, I could not control myself. Tears ran freely down my cheeks. To my surprise, many of them started to weep with me. Something special happened in that moment. Following the gathering they started to trust me even though I had no credibility in their world. I hadn't shared their life, but I had shared their pain.<sup>2</sup>"

Jesus came to share our lives. He took on our pain. He understands it, he sanctifies it. And he sends us back into the world to be Jesus among so many other who are wounded and broken. To share the power of love.

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Paco Amador, "Weeping on Heaven's Door," Leadership Journal (November 2013)