

Advent 2021—AWAITING OUR TRUE KING
Jesus is Our King of Love
Luke 2:8-20
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I have a question for you as we begin today. The question is for children—some of us haven't been kids for a long time, but we've all been children with parents or guardians at some point in our lives. So, this question is for all of us. Here's the question: "Can you recall something you believed and accepted to be true as a child that was different from what your parents intended to communicate?" In asking this question, I don't mean, "*I was sure I was going to get a real pony for Christmas and instead I got a toy horse.*" Or, "*I was convinced we were going to the beach for a week's vacation, instead, we took a day trip to the Gettysburg Battlefield.*" I'm thinking of beliefs you had about yourself, or truths about life, or your image of God. I'm confident every one of us embraced beliefs that were different than what our parents intended to teach us. I know that was true for me.

I grew up in a good home with parents who loved me and taught me to love Jesus. Our family read the Bible, memorized Scripture and prayed together. My parents took me to church shortly after I was born and I attended Sunday School, Children's Church and Youth Group every week. I had excellent children's and youth leaders, many whom I still remember and respect. I've known John 3:16—"*For God so loved the world...*"—and the song, "Jesus Loves Me" for as far back as I can remember, but I didn't begin to fully understand God's love until I was in my mid-20s. I grew up believing God's love for me was dependent on me doing the things good Christians were supposed to do and avoiding behaviors good Christians shouldn't do. I believed God's love for me was conditional even though that wasn't what I read in the Bible or was taught by my parents, teachers or pastors.

It wasn't until I went to seminary and learned to know roommates and friends who didn't follow rules I thought were mandatory and yet they loved God deeply, that my view of God's love began to change. After graduating from seminary, I accepted a job as Youth Pastor at McBIC. As I listened to Pastor Ken Hepner's teaching and preaching and as I was mentored by him and read extensively about God's nature and character in the Bible and in other books, I

began to understand that God's love for me was unconditional. He loved me independently of what I did. Hoping my own children would understand Jesus' unconditional love for them at a young age, I began a bedtime ritual with them from the time they were very small. As we tucked them in at night I'd ask, "*What can you always count on?*" To which they'd respond, "*My Daddy loves me.*" I repeated that routine with them every night for two reasons. First, I wanted them to know they could always count on my love no matter what they did. Secondly, and most importantly, I wanted them to realize that their Heavenly Father would always love them unconditionally.

During our preaching series over the 3 weeks prior to Advent, called "The Frailty of Human Kings," we focused on human frailty, sin and brokenness. Now during Advent, we're emphasizing Jesus' perfect kingship in these weeks leading up to Christmas. Our weekly Advent themes are: Jesus is our King of Hope, our King of Love, our King of Joy and our King of Peace. Jesus' hope, love, joy and peace are all essential aspects of our faith, but as I thought about this week's focus on love, I realized that love is the most important of these traits for me. I've heard it said that while the Bible highlights innumerable aspects of God's character, love is the only one directly equated with God—"God is love."

God's unconditional love is emphasized throughout Scripture and yet a quick reading of the Old Testament leads some people to focus on God's judgment, his anger and his seemingly harsh punishment of his people, while overlooking his deep love. During our "Frailty of Human Kings" series I mentioned that a primary theme of the Old Testament is that the problems of life can't be fixed with human solutions. God continually pointed his people to the coming Messiah as the only One who could right life's wrongs.

One of the ways I find it helpful to think about the Old Testament's focus on law and rules and ritual and on God's judgment and frequent punishment of his people when they went astray is to think about God's interaction with Israel as a parent's relationship with their young son or daughter. Parents of young children know that rules and restrictions are important in setting boundaries for their kids. As parents, we want our young children to love us, but we guide, correct and discipline them—when necessary—to protect them, teach them, and enable them to grow. As our children grow older and (hopefully) mature, we give them more freedom

and increasingly shift away from being highly directive. When our children move toward adulthood, we hope their love for us will blossom into a relationship in which they eventually view us as confidants and friends. Similarly, Jesus is introduced to us in the New Testament as the fulfillment of God's promise that a Messiah would come. In his letter to the Colossian Church the Apostle Paul writes that Jesus is the full and perfect and expression of God's nature and character. In other words, to understand God fully, we need to look at and know Jesus.

Despite the skewed picture many people have of God based on what they read in the Old Testament, prophecies from Isaiah and others portray God's deep heart of love for his people. As I read portions of Isaiah's prophecies, I encourage you to think about how God's deep love was fulfilled in Jesus and what the implications of his love are for us.

The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.

Say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come to save you."

The eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.

Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way.

They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away. Isaiah 35 selected

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.

He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.

He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will

soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.
Isaiah 40 selected

Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me,
and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare.

Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my
faithful love promised to David.

You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Isaiah 55 selected

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to
the poor.

He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from
darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor to comfort all who mourn, and
provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of
joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. Isaiah 61 selected

Who would have imagined that all the prophecies spoken by Isaiah and others under the
direction of the Holy Spirit would be fulfilled through Jesus? Who could have conceived that
God would perfectly display his love for us through the birth of a baby? And who would have
guessed that the first people to learn of Jesus' birth would be shepherds—some of the least
privileged, most-marginalized people of that time? I invite you to follow along as I read Luke
chapter 2 verses 8-20.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An
angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were
terrified. 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.
This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. Luke 2:8-20

I began the sermon this morning talking about God's unconditional love. Something occurred to me early last week that I never thought of before. Much of my good thinking happens when I'm riding my bike or in the shower—both places where I don't have a lot of distractions—and this occurred to me in the shower on Sunday evening. The thought I had was that conditional love is an oxymoron—that's a fancy word that means two words are contradictory. Love that's conditional isn't really love at all. If I tell my wife, "I'll love you, honey, as long as you're nice to me, cook good meals and be a great mom to our kids," do I really love her? If I communicate the message to my children, "I'll love you, son or daughter, as long as you respect me, treat me well and don't cause me problems," what kind of love is that? Similarly, if God's love for us is determined by how well we do at following his rules, worshiping Him or being nice to others, does He love us?

We tend to view God's love as conditional, based on how good we are or how well we do at loving Him. In announcing Jesus' birth to shepherds, God made it clear that his love wasn't limited to the wealthy, the famous, the well-educated or even the religious. His love was for everyone. And while many things have changed over the past 2,000 years, God's love hasn't changed. His love is available to every one of us, and his love for us is unconditional—not dictated by who we are or by what we do or don't do. We can always count on the fact that our Heavenly Father loves us and He demonstrated his love most clearly by sending Jesus to us as our King of Love.

As we move to our time of response, I'd like each of us to answer the question, "How have I seen Jesus be the King of LOVE for me this past year?"