

# JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

## God with Us Brings Love

Sunday, December 8

Rev. Dr. Charley Reeb, Senior Pastor

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Pastor John Ortberg was giving a bath to his three children. Johnny was still in the tub. Laura was out and safely in her pajamas. He was trying to get Mallory dried off. Mallory was out of the water, but was doing what has come to be known in their family as the Dee Dah Day dance. This dance consists of running around and around in circles, singing over and over again, "Dee dah day, dee dah day." It was a simple dance of great joy.

On this particular night her father was irritated. "Mallory, hurry!" he insisted. So she did. She hurried. But not as her father intended. Instead, she began running in circles faster and faster and chanting "Dee Dah Day" more rapidly.

"No Mallory that is not what I mean!" said her father. "Stop with the dee dah day stuff and get over here so I can dry you off. Hurry!"

Then Mallory asked her father a profound question: "Why?" Why did she have to hurry?

John Ortberg suddenly realized he had no answer. He had nowhere to go, nothing to do, no meetings to attend, no sermons to write. He was just so used to hurrying, so preoccupied with his own little agenda, so trapped in this rut of moving from one task to another, that here was life, here was joy, here was an invitation to the dance right in front of him--and he was missing it.

So he got up and he and Mallory did the Dee Dah Day dance together.

My guess is that most of us here can relate to Ortberg. We can get so busy . . . We can have so many little things on our agenda . . . We can be so stressed out that we forget to do a little Dee Dah Day dance in life. We forget to enjoy God's blessings of life.

Ironically, it's often during Advent and Christmas that we are guilty of this the most. The most wonderful time of the year often turns into the most stressful time of the year. Parties to go to. Packages to wrap. Christmas cards to write. Dinners to plan. Expectations to meet. How

does anybody ever get it all done? And how does anyone remain sane through it all?

Advent and Christmas does not always give us the peace, hope, joy and love of Christ. Instead, it gives us what is known as "Destination Addiction!" Ever heard of that? It's a preoccupation with the idea that happiness is in the next place, the next thing, the next job, the next toy, the next partner. If we can just get that one gift this Christmas, all will be right with the world. If we can just get that perfect job, life will be as it should be. If we can just get that big gift wrapped in a red bow, we will be happy.

But life never works that way. As soon as we get to our destination and the newness and novelty wears off, we are not satisfied and we want something else.

I like how someone put it, "The problem with destination addiction is that until we give up that idea happiness is somewhere else, happiness will never be where we are."

Hear this:

*"Don't get so busy making the holiday special that you forget what makes it special."*

So, for the next few minutes, forget your outside cares and concerns. Pretend that you have nothing to do but reflect on the meaning of Christmas – the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Listen to the words of the prophet: "**A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all humankind will see God's salvation'**" (Matthew 3:3).

This is John the Baptist announcing the good news of Advent and Christmas. He wants us to get ready because Christ is coming and his presence and power is

transforming. The promise of this season has an enormous impact. Last week I reminded us that Advent tells us that God will not be God without us.

Today I want to focus on the greatest gift of Advent: Love. God's love. The old Christmas poem is true:

*Love came down at Christmas,  
Love all lovely, Love Divine,  
Love was born at Christmas,  
Star and Angels gave the sign.*

How can we be sure?

Someone wisely stated:

*Did you know that Socrates taught for 40 years, Plato for 50, Aristotle for 40, and Jesus for only 3. Yet the influence of Christ's 3-year ministry infinitely transcends the impact left by the combined 130 years of teaching of these greatest philosophers of all antiquity.*

*Jesus painted no pictures, yet the finest painting of Raphael, Michelangelo, and Leonardo da Vinci received their inspiration from Him.*

*Jesus wrote no poetry, but Dante, Milton, and scores of the world's greatest poets were inspired by Him.*

*Jesus composed no music; still Haydn, Handel, Beethoven, Bach, and Mendelssohn reached their highest perfection of melody in the hymns, symphonies, and oratorios they composed in his praise.*

Every sphere of humanity has been inspired by Jesus Christ. Why? Because he was the perfect embodiment of the greatest power in the world: Love. He was God's love incarnate.

I recall my mom telling me about the time my older sister Jill got scared in the middle of the night when she was little. She ran into my parent's room and said, "Mommy, Mommy. I am scared. Can I sleep with you?" My mom said, "Sweetheart, you don't need to be scared. God is with you. Go back to your room and remember God is with you and you will fall asleep." My sister replied, "No Mommy. I want someone with skin on."

Advent reminds us that God put skin on to show us how much he loves us. And it is this love that truly changes the world.

This morning I want to introduce this love to some of you who have never truly heard it. To others I want to remind you of it, in case you have forgotten.

There is lots of talk of Mister Rogers these days. The new movie about him is truly inspired. I encourage all of you to see it.

In 1997, Fred Rogers was presented with a lifetime achievement award by The National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences for his work on "Mister Rogers Neighborhood," which ran from 1968 to 2001. When he got up on stage, he didn't do the typical acceptance speech. He had the audience do an exercise. He would say:

*"So many people have helped me to come here to this night. Some of you are here, some are far away and some are even in Heaven.*

*All of us have special ones who loved us into being.*

*Would you just take, along with me, 10 seconds to think of the people who have helped you become who you are, those who cared about you and wanted what was best for you in life.*

*"Whomever you've been thinking about, how pleased they must be to know the difference you feel they have made."*

I'd like for you to do that exercise right now. Take a few seconds and think about those who loved you into being – those people who have made you who you are.

I believe God put those people in your life for two big reasons. One, so you would know that you are loved. Two, so you would be inspired to spread that love to others.

Fred Rogers was a wise man. He knew the power of God's love. He was a Christ follower and an ordained Presbyterian minister. He knew there is nothing more attractive, so healing, so transforming than love and kindness. It translates everywhere, regardless of age, gender, nationality, and race.

Pflum Peterson is an Emmy-award-winning TV journalist. She is the parent of four young children. Not too long ago she was assigned to produce a national television segment on Mister Rogers, in connection with

the release of the then-new documentary, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?”

She was charged with putting together a taped spot, highlighting some of the best moments of the beloved television series.

To complete the task, she decided to lock herself in her bedroom one night and binge on “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood.”

Her husband suggested she do it in the living room instead, but she reminded him how their kids mocked them when they tried to show them Footloose with Kevin Bacon. After fifteen minutes they told her to turn it off; they were scarred for life.

Peterson would continue to write: “The kids had similarly mocked other pop culture icons of our shared youth. They called the vintage Madonna I played for them ‘boring’ and referred to Springsteen as ‘grandpa’ music. They described cinematic classics like ‘E.T.’ and the original Karate Kid as ‘too slow.’

“I’d been crushed before by their lack of appreciation for the icons of our youth. I wasn’t going to let them do that to Mister Rogers.

“So into her bedroom I retreated to watch Mister Rogers alone. And that’s when something magical happened.

“Within a half-hour of my binge fest, my youngest two children, then ages 5 and 7, came up to ask me for help with some homework. They sat down on the bed beside her and peered at the television.

“In the episode she was watching, Mister Rogers had gone to a restaurant in Pittsburgh to show his young viewers how restaurants work.

‘Mommy,’ asked my young daughter. ‘Who is that nice man?’

‘It’s Mommy’s friend, Fred,’ I explained.

‘I like his voice,’ said my 7-year-old son.

‘I like his clothes,’ said my daughter.

‘Can we watch with you?’ my son asked.

I was skeptical, but nodded. And so it began.

“I held my breath, waiting for them to tell her the episode was too slow, to implore her to fast-forward to a moment when something more interesting happens.

“I waited for them to abandon ship and seek out an iPad or a snack in the other room, to seize control of the remote and turn the television to the Cartoon Network.

But they didn’t do any of those things. And when that episode was over, they asked for another. And then, shockingly, another.

Eventually, my older boys joined in.

I asked my youngest two, as they obsessed over the fish, what was it about the show that appealed to them.

After a beat, they gave me that look that parents will readily recognize, the one that best translates to ‘Isn’t it obvious?’

‘He likes kids, Mommy,’ my daughter said. ‘Kids know when a grown-up likes them.’

‘And he’s not too loud,’ my son added. ‘When we watch him, there’s no noise. You don’t have to worry about anything.’

“Kind and calm. So that explained everything. In a world of so much chaos and noise, kids liked calm sincerity. Say what you will about youth today: That their attention spans are too short. That their communication skills are lacking. That they’re drawn to things that are bright and shiny and temporary.

“The truth is they want what’s real, and they’re drawn to what’s kind” (story from telegram.com).

That’s why we need Advent so much, why the world needs Advent so much. For Christ personifies the source of all kindness and love – God almighty.

I wish the whole world could know and experience this love. Can you imagine how different this world would be if everyone knew that they were loved?”

Crime would reduce dramatically. So would war, violence and strife.

I recall reading an interesting book by an FBI agent who had studied the most heinous crimes and criminals. His conclusion? The biggest reason why these individuals committed such horrible crimes was that they were not properly loved as children.

The question is not “Are you a Democrat or a Republican? Are you liberal or conservative...?” The question is “Do you reflect the love of Jesus in the world? Does the world know you are a disciple by your love?” The question is, “When people experience you do they know the promise of Advent - the light of Christ is in the world and the darkness cannot overcome it?”

King Duncan wrote about an event of some significance that took place in Wauconda, Illinois, a small town with a population of 6,500. Duncan writes, “For the past 45 years the town had placed two large illuminated crosses on the city water towers during the Christmas season. Then the town council received a threat. Someone was going to sue the city if the crosses were erected in the coming Christmas season, based on the separation of church and state. The town council grudgingly took them down.

“But that’s when the citizens of Wauconda took matters into their own hands. They didn’t counter-sue. Nor did they organize angry protests... They decided to honor the missing crosses by placing lighted reminders of Christ on their own property. All over the community, the citizens of Wauconda put up lighted crosses and nativity stars and manger scenes and trees draped in lights. They put up so many lights that you could see Wauconda from the interstate freeway! Wauconda looked like an entirely different town. All night it was as bright as day because the people decided to turn on the lights of Christmas.

This Advent season turn on your heart light and then the world will know the true meaning of Christmas – the power of God’s love.



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