

## Monday, December 15, 2008

Our theme for Christmas 2008 is "The Magnificent Mystery". There is nothing normal, predictable or even easily understandable about the Christmas miracle. While every pregnancy is to some extent a miracle, can you explain Mary's? The concept that God would place Himself inside a fetus, and willingly limit Himself to the human experience, while retaining His divinity, is a miracle almost beyond comprehension. The purpose of God's incarnation . . . the Redemption of humanity through Atonement and Regeneration, pushes our logic beyond the point of reason. Can you explain it fully?

Each person in the Biblical Christmas account was faced with the "Magnificent Mystery", and we are seeking to understand what God did in their lives. Our world today isn't all that different from theirs. Thus far we've looked at the HOPE and PEACE that God offers us through this Christmas Mystery. This week, let's dig deeply into the concept of Magnificent Mystery LOVE. While Hope and Peace are both personal, private experiences LOVE is only experienced in relationship.

For HOPE we looked at Zechariah and for PEACE we considered Mary in the Christmas account. Joseph is the person who grabs my attention when considering LOVE. Actually very little is written about him. Matthew 1 contains his "genealogy", his invitation into the "Mystery", and his marriage to Mary. Chapter 2 records Joseph leading his family to Egypt and then eventually back to Nazareth . . . and then he's gone. Luke 2:41-52 gives us a glimpse of Joseph and Mary when Jesus was about 12, and Mark 6:3 gives the names of other children of Mary, but does not indicate Joseph is their father, (we assume he was). Did Joseph die early? He does not appear in any of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' adult life nor is he reported with Mary that Passover when Jesus faced His Passion and death. But in his brief appearance in the "Mystery", his life defines LOVE for us! What similarities do you see with his ancestor Joseph in Genesis 37, 39-50?

## Tuesday, December 16, 2008

As with HOPE and PEACE, it's important we understand LOVE originates with God . . . it's not a human idea! God's love is Holy, because He is essentially Holy, thus what results from God's love is always pure. When reading through the creation story (Gen. 1, 2) do you see God's primary motivation for creating humans was so He and we could live in a pure Love Relationship with each other?

Moses repeatedly reminded the Hebrew slaves that God chose to love them, and that love motivated Him to rescue them (Deut. 7:7, 8), thus his challenge that they love God in response (Deut. 10:12; 6:4, 5; 30:20). That theme is repeated throughout the Bible and human history . . . God's love for every human being He creates is unconditional and longs for a love response. It's the central element of the Christmas mystery. Love motivated God to develop the preposterous plan of the incarnation / Love caused Jesus to willingly place Himself inside that fetus / Love is the primary motivation for Jesus to go through every phase of His earthly life! Is that why Jesus said to His friends *"as I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples."* (John 13:35)

So what is this God-style love and how do we develop it in ourselves? As you'll recall, I linked Joseph's story with 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. It begins with "Love always Protects". Do you see God consistently, repeatedly "protecting" His people through the Bible and History? (Exodus 17; 2 Chronicles 20, etc.) How has He protected you? I hope you understand Jesus' death and resurrection are protection offered us: Protection from God's wrath judgment against our condemning sin / Protection from Satan's hatred for God and God's people! How do you see Joseph 'protecting' Mary and her Child in Matt. 1 & 2? Remember she could have been stoned for apparent adultery! Look closely for emotional, physical, practical protection. How would your relationships change if you made Protection Love a priority in each? Wounding by those who should love you is most painful of all.

## Wednesday, December 17, 2008

One week from today is Christmas Eve. The Biblical account tells us Mary and Joseph went from Nazareth to Bethlehem probably by donkey. Depending on the route, it was more than 100 miles of sometimes treacherous terrain. It's likely it took longer than a week! "Love always Protects" was a constant awareness for Joseph as he struggled to meet the urgent tax-census demands of Rome while caring for his young, miraculously pregnant bride at full term. Can you feel his stress . . . what would you have done? How do you find God's guidance in such situations?

"Love always Trusts" is another phrase in 1 Cor. 13:4-7 which describes God-style love. How do you see such trust in Joseph as he responds to the angelic dreams of Matthew 1 & 2. Not one, or two, but do you see four of them? Do you see Joseph obeying God in full trust that he had understood God's instructions; he had full confidence in God's Wisdom; and he trusted that Mary would be fully compliant to join him in following God's instructions, even though they almost always seem preposterous and had considerable consequences . . . a stable for birth / late night escape to a foreign country / return to Israel / re-settlement back in Nazareth where they would live with ridicule and rejection!

Now, what about your "love always trusts"? Have you established that track record with God, so He knows if He invites you to take a step of faith with Him, you won't fight Him? What about your family? Do they trust you, because they know you are following God and can discern when God gives you instructions? What about your children or grand-children, are they learning to trust God implicitly in the very pragmatic stuff of life . . . daily survival.

We often quote Proverbs 3:5, 6 *"trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding, in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths"*, but how do you live that out every day and do you see it is a measure of your true love for God??

Thursday, December 18, 2008

Two weeks from today will be Jan. 1<sup>st</sup> 2009! The roller-coaster year of '08 will be over, but most everything I read suggests '09 will be even more of the same, with a new leadership team in Washington, new leaders to be elected in several countries of the world including Israel, and the continued global economic turmoil which will affect every American, possibly for a long time. "Love always PERSEVERES" is the third phrase from 1 Corinthians 13:7 which we consider as we evaluate the "Magnificent Mystery" of Christmas. Have you concluded God Perseveres? How many times do you suppose God has considered just wiping the white board clean . . . simply hitting the "undo" key on His computer keypad . . . and everything is gone! No planet earth, no people, no sun, no solar system . . . as when He began it all by speaking it into existence, maybe God has considered ending it all with just a word . . . "gone" . . . and perhaps start all over.

I'm very grateful God perseveres despite our unreliability, unresponsiveness, unrepentance and uncooperativeness. God's love for humanity is seen through His perseverance in extending His forgiving love, His grace, His mercy, and even consistently supplying all we need for existence even when we refuse to acknowledge His existence! (Is. 45:5,6) Remarkable!

Do you see Joseph's "love always perseveres" in Matthew 1 & 2? From that first visit of an angel to urge Joseph NOT to divorce Mary, but rather to marry her . . . life just got more and more complicated and painful for Joseph. But I see him "staying the course" with determination to be reliable, dependable, persevering regardless of the cost so the incarnation miracle could be fully accomplished! Do you see the same with Jesus? How many times could He have quit the mission . . . how many tactics did Satan try to discourage or defeat Him? Do you live "love always perseveres" . . . in your family, your relationship with Christ? *Love is expensive, but no price is too high for God-style love!*

What will it take for you to finish 2008 well, in every way?

Friday, December 19, 2008

Have you noticed that the Bible rarely uses words like "always" and "never"? That's one reason why 1 Corinthians 13:7 is so significant: "*love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres . . . love never fails!*" Can you accept that as God's promise to you? Do you see the "Magnificent Mystery" of Christmas as a tangible evidence of such a promise? Have you noticed God is simply DETERMINED to love you . . . regardless of your response?!

Consider now, "love always hopes" and "love never fails" in the Christmas account of Matthew 1 & 2. Following the birth of the Christ child, Joseph and Mary, as good Jews, brought Him to the Temple for consecration (Luke 2:21-38). Exodus 13 and Leviticus 12 have a fuller explanation of why they did what they did.

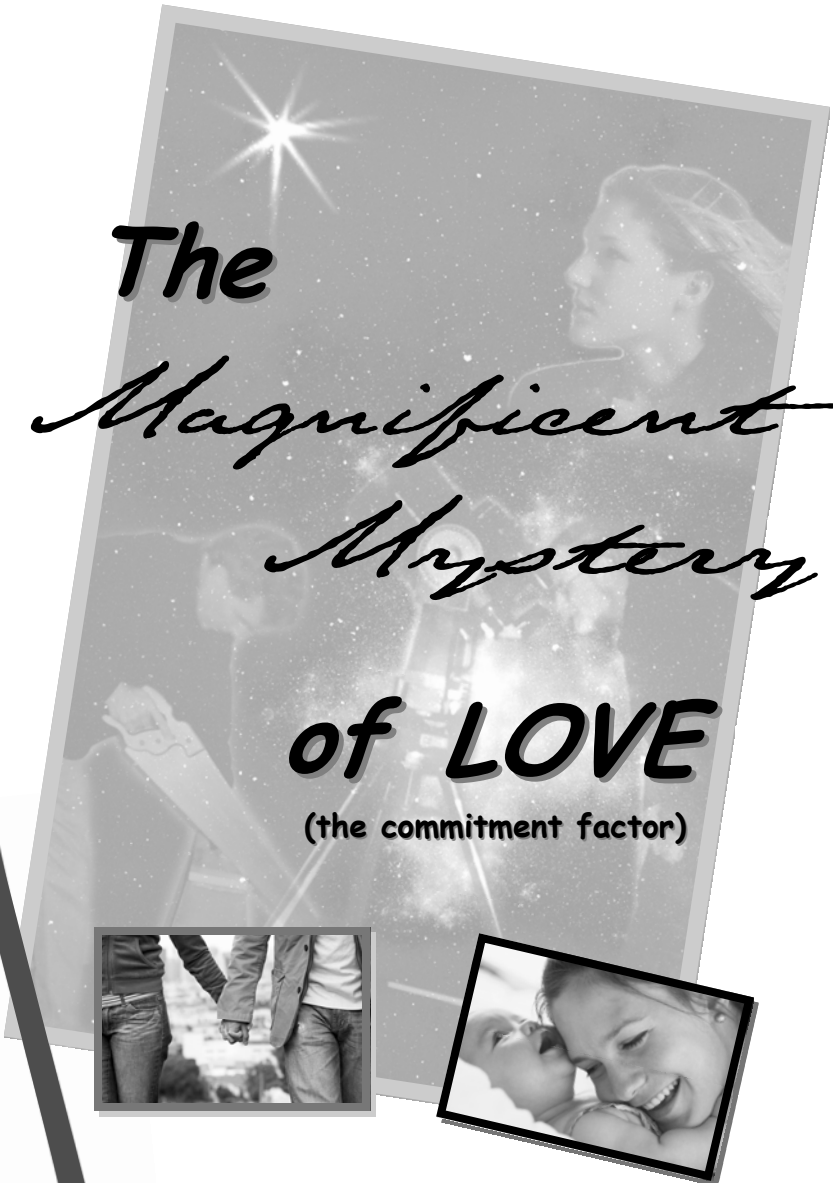
We can be sure they did not expect old Simeon and Anna to approach them and say what they did (Luke 2:25-38). God's love to humanity expressed tangibly through the birth of the long awaited Messiah (Jesus Christ) was great HOPE for a world languishing in despair. Notice please the direct involvement of the Holy Spirit in moving Simeon to be there precisely when Joseph and Mary arrived . . . remember the Temple area was similar to today's "Temple Mount", several football fields in size, so not at all like encountering someone in the foyer of the church!! Note, Simeon's words were not exclusive to Jews, but included Gentiles too. But, of course, verse 35 was very painful to Mary, and while she likely had many wonderful experiences seeing Jesus heal and help, she also experienced deep pain watching Him rejected, persecuted and killed! She and Joseph, likely lived with constant rejection from Nazareth who simply could not believe the preposterous story of a miracle conception.

Finally, "love never fails" seems to be the phrase that like a banner, hangs over Joseph, Mary and Jesus for their entire lifetime, would you agree? Consider Luke 2:40, 51, 52. Consider Hebrews 2:14-18; 4:14-16; 7:22-28; 9:24-28; 10:11-14, 19-23!! Celebrate these great truths friends!

Pastor Doug Anderson



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Highway 50 & Harris Road  
P.O. Box 1200 • Williams Bay, WI 53191  
(262) 245-6294  
www.calvarycommunity.net