

Joke: A preacher, who shall we say was “humor inspired”, attended a conference to help encourage and better equip pastors for their ministry. Among the speakers were many well-known and dynamic speakers.

One speaker, boldly approached the pulpit, gathered the entire crowd’s attention, and said, “the best years of my life were spent in the arms of a woman that wasn’t my wife!” The crowd was shocked! After a pause that seemed like forever he continued by saying, “And that woman was my mother!” The crowd burst into laughter and he then delivered the rest of his speech, which went quite well.

The next week, the pastor who attended decided he’d give this humor thing a try, and used that same joke in his sermon. As he approached the pulpit that Sunday morning, he tried to rehearse the joke in his head.

Getting to the microphone, he said loudly, “The greatest years of my life were spend in the arms of another woman that was not my wife!” The congregation inhaled half the air in the room! After standing there for almost 10 seconds

in stunned silence, trying to recall the second half of the joke, the pastor finally blurred out, "...and I can't remember who she was!"

We are beginning a new five week series called The Wonder of Christmas - it will take us right up to our Christmas Eve service. There will be no Christmas Day service this year, but, as we begin the series this week let's talk about the wonder of His love.

What is love anyway? Or as Tina Turner asked, what's love got to do with it?

I'm sure you have heard the phrase curiosity killed the . . . cat.

Well, Curiosity may have killed the cat, but being curious can also help people experience the love of God and the relationship that He desires us to enjoy with Him.

Staying curious when we read and hear the stories from the Bible, such as the birth narrative of Mary and baby

Jesus, that we are going to spend some time in today, can open new perspectives and understandings of the Wonder of Christmas in fresh new ways.

Before I begin let's watch this. . .show TWOC video
(skitguys.com)

So, let me begin by reading that birth narrative, it's read pretty much every Advent season, and begin to open our eyes with a lens of curiosity and see how God may want us to experience His love this Christmas from a different point of view.

Luke 2:1–14 (NIV): In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to their own town to register. 4 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. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was

expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 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. 8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." 13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

The angel actress preparing for the Nativity scene in the video modeled some wonderfully curious questions that should engage our minds and hearts with the earthiness

and texture of the Christmas story that perhaps we do not normally consider during the Advent season.

How did Mary share the news of her pregnancy with her parents? What was she feeling? How did such a divine message from the angel to this teenage mother-to-be impact the way she related to her God? What did a command not to be afraid really do to her internal fears that Mary must have been experiencing in those days of pregnancy?

These are all curiosities that we can easily relate to with the people in the story, and ultimately they can impact how we relate to God.

One of the observations we can see is that the Wonder of Christmas is expressed through the fact that God made the first move in loving us by sending us His only Son Jesus.

The disciple named John wrote some bold and shaping realities about the love we can experience because of the love God expresses towards people.

Look at these two verses that John wrote on the wonder of God's love. . .

1 John 4:19 (TPT): Our love for others is our grateful response to the love God first demonstrated to us.

John 3:16 (TPT): For this is how much God loved the world—he gave his one and only, unique Son as a gift. So now everyone who believes in him will never perish but experience everlasting life.

The love of God for people so compelled Him to make the first move in manifesting His love towards people that He came in the form of a baby.

The prophecies called Him Immanuel, which means, “God with us.”

The God who loves us is the God who is with us in the person of Jesus. He came near to us because He wanted a relationship with us that would enable us to love Him

back like He desires to be loved by all His created sons and daughters.

God made the move to choose Mary as the mother of His only begotten Son in part because she could be trusted with such a task but also because of the way Mary must have loved God with all her heart, soul, mind, and strength.

She loved God back with her life.

God chose her to be the loving mother of Jesus even though it was a startling moment when the message was conveyed to her by the angel Gabriel.

Mary, who was called “highly favored” by Gabriel, must have been one who engaged in the prayers of her people toward the God who loved her and loved her people.

One of the most natural and normal ways that two beings who love one another cultivate that relationship is by communicating with each other.

Part of the nature and character of God is that He longs to be communicated with by those whom He loves. God longs to hear from His sons and daughters. And if we as humans are to have an authentic, growing relationship with God, we must be able to ask our curious questions about life. Such questions of curiosity are not off-putting to God. Rather, calling out to God to solicit a response from Him is what we see God inviting people to do in the Bible.

In the 42 chapters of Job 330 questions asked, so I think God's ok with our questions. It's a normal response to things we just don't understand or are curious about.

Jeremiah 33:3 as a matter of fact, is an invitation to make a "call" to Him.

Notice what the prophet Jeremiah records from God about this part of God's nature and character in his letter.

Jeremiah 33:3 (NIV): Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.

how many would like for God to tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know?

This verse demonstrates that God desires for people to communicate with Him. Call on Him with our questions and our curiosities through our moments of daily prayer.

Our love for God is bound to grow as we ask and wait for His response.

When we feel uncertain, perplexed, afraid, annoyed, defeated, discouraged, or unsure about the next steps we are to take in life, we are invited as His creation to call on Him as our Creator.

God wants to hear from us. He longs for us to share with Him in prayer whatever the questions and curiosities that are occupying our lives and minds may be.

He is approachable and intimately concerned with connecting with us as ones whom He loves that have been created in His image.

Hebrews 4:16 (TPT): So now we come freely and boldly to where love is enthroned, to receive mercy's kiss and discover the grace we urgently need to strengthen us in our time of weakness.

Matthew 10:29–31 (TPT): You can buy two sparrows for only a copper coin, yet not even one sparrow falls from its nest without the knowledge of your Father. Aren't you worth much more to God than many sparrows? 30–31 So don't worry. For your Father cares deeply about even the smallest detail of your life.

He cares deeply about what. . .?

God wants us to reach out, connect, convey, and wait to receive from Him.

We see this same part of God's nature and character being offered in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount recorded in Matthew chapters 5 - 7. Notice what Jesus says about our communication strategy with God that will yield a response if we do.

Matthew 7:7–11 (TPT): 7 “Ask, and the gift is yours. Seek, and you’ll discover. Knock, and the door will be opened for you. 8 For every persistent one will get what he asks for. Every persistent seeker will discover what he longs for. And everyone who knocks persistently will one day find an open door. 9 “Do you know of any parent who would give his hungry child, who asked for food, a plate of rocks instead? 10 Or when asked for a piece of fish, what parent would offer his child a snake instead? 11 If you, imperfect as you are, know how to lovingly take care of your children and give them what’s best, how much more ready is your heavenly Father to give wonderful gifts to those who ask him?”

Jesus is talking to the people about stepping closer into the desired relationship with our Heavenly Father that He created people to have and enjoy.

Stepping closer to God through communication is what Jesus’ brother, James, invites people to do in his letter.

Chapter 4 verse 8 tells us to. . .

“Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you.”

Drawing near is a relational step of trust. As we draw near, we can communicate with God by asking about the curiosities that have been rolling around in our lives.

Asking and expecting a response is according to Scripture something we should count on.

Why? Because He is the Good Father; He wants to give us good things. He wants to provide and connect.

The three verbs that Jesus articulates:

“Ask...Seek...Knock...,” those are verbs that talk about being intentional and lead to relational engagement.

The wonder of Christmas is about an intentional first move of love by God with the hope of relational engagement among the people He came to rescue from the affliction of sin.

These verbs are in a very important tense in the original language. They are in the present perfect tense. That means an action happens and keeps on happening.

What Jesus invites his followers to do is pray to God for discernment in a way that starts and doesn't stop.

Jesus is saying: Ask and keep on asking; seek and keep on seeking; knock and keep on knocking. As you do this, you are positioning yourself to receive a response.

That's what the Scripture tells us, every persistent seeker will discover what he longs for.

and hear this church, the response may be "yes." It may be "no." It may be "not now." But regardless, Jesus invites us to more than just an "in the moment" prayer that is passive and nonchalant.

Jesus invites us to be intentional about engaging in a process of understanding, of receiving, of discernment.

It starts with intentional, active, and consistent prayer, that is a communication mechanism with the heart of God.

When we are burdened with fears and anxieties not unlike those feelings that Mary may have had when encountering the angel of the Lord, we can bank on the nature and character of the God who wants to hear from us regarding our anxieties.

He wants to hear from us and wants us to bring our fears to Him because He cares for us and loves us deeply.

Remember, He loved us first.

Now, we get the opportunity to love God back relationally through communicating with Him our fears, curiosities, and yes even the anxieties in our lives.

Notice what Peter says about this in his first letter.

1 Peter 5:7 (TPT): Pour out all your worries and stress upon him and leave them there, for he always tenderly cares for you.

Of all the disciples, Peter must have experienced the anxiety of letting Jesus down when he denied even knowing Him by the fires on the night of Jesus' betrayal.

Peter knew the weight of that anxiety filled with regret; but, he also experienced the forgiveness and deep love of Jesus when he had breakfast on the Galilee shores with the Savior after a long night of fishing.

Jesus restored and conveyed a deep and healing love towards Peter that would launch Peter into a new chapter of ministry.

If Peter can trust that kind of love modeled in Jesus, so can we.

The love God has for us is strong enough for our failures and fears as well as our curiosities that we bring to Him in prayer.

As the angel articulated to those shepherds, Jesus is the Savior who was born for “all people.”

That includes the people who would let Him down and cause Him pain through our choices. We can always come back around and reconnect with repentant hearts and lives that will be received by the God who first loved us and always will.

Whether you are a first-century Jewish teenage girl trying to understand how you just were chosen by God to be the mother of the Messiah or you are a twenty-first-century person trying to figure out life with God in your circumstances, know that God loves you this Christmas season, and every season.

He is not afraid nor surprised by the curiosities or your anxieties that crop up in life through the seasons and circumstances of change.

He knows where you have been, where you are, and where you are headed.

He has a plan for your life and desires that plan to include a heart-to-heart with Him as your Creator.

He wants you to call on Him with all your questions and your doubts. He will answer you and show you the next steps as you walk faithfully with Him through this season of life.

The God who came near in the form of an innocent baby that first wondrous Christmas is the same God who desires to be near you this Christmas by His Holy Spirit.

He is not only Immanuel, the God who is with you, but also, He is the God who is in you and for you.

And as the Apostle Paul once wrote in Romans 8:

Romans 8:31-32 (TPT): 31 So, what does all this mean? If God has determined to stand with us, tell me, who then could ever stand against us? 32 For God has proved his love by giving us his greatest treasure, the gift of his Son. And since God freely offered him up as the sacrifice for us all, he certainly won't withhold from us anything else he has to give.

“If God is for us, who can be against us?”

So sing all the Christmas songs; enjoy all the festivities that are part of this special time of year, and know that in the middle of your anxieties, fears, doubts, frustrations, uncertainties, and even your curiosities about life and God, He still deeply loves you!

And He wants to connect with you in a special way during this wondrous Christmas season.

What would it look like for you to open your heart and life to Jesus in a profoundly vulnerable way this Christmas?

What if you made time sometime today to pour out your heart to the Lord and share with Him all that is on your mind?

What if you gave over to Jesus in a time of undistracted and intentional prayer the places that you are hurting in your soul, the questions that are circling in your mind, the fears that are paralyzing your progress, the hopes and dreams you would like to experience and see fulfilled?

What if you either spoke those words out loud to the Lord in a verbal prayer or at the very least made the intentional action of writing them down as a form of deliberate communication?

If you did something like that today, you would be taking a relational step toward the God who loved you first. You would be drawing near to God with such vulnerabilities, which would garner a response based on what we read

from James 4:8 that would include God drawing near to you.

Take a chance this Christmas and move towards the God who moved heaven and earth to come near to us all in the person of Jesus.

He wants to be your Savior. He wants to hear from you. He wants to bless you. He wants to love you in a way that changes your life from the inside out.

Are you not curious about what such an engagement and interaction with that kind of loving Savior could ultimately mean for your life?

The wonder of Christmas is waiting for you to experience this love this season.

Join us next week as we continue our journey with the Wonder of Christmas looking at the Wonder of His peace.