

## **Christmas Eve: A Love Story**

**John 1:9-14**

**December 23-24, 2018**

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When I was a child, we had a nativity set that we brought out on the first Sunday of Advent, four weeks before Christmas. There was no stable in our nativity set, just a manger – and all of the characters that we've heard about tonight. We placed the manger, the animal feeding trough that would become a cradle for the newborn Jesus – we placed it on a table in the Living Room where it would remain all alone until Christmas Eve, and then all of the other pieces were scattered – the shepherds on a bookshelf, the magi on the china cabinet in the dining room, and Mary and Joseph on top of the piano. And then throughout the month, the characters would be moved as each made their journey, ever closer to the manger. Each time we entered the Living Room, it seemed they were in a different place: Mary and Joseph on their 90 mile walk from Nazareth to Bethlehem in response to Caesar's decree that everyone return to their ancestral hometown to be counted so Roman would be sure to tax everyone; the shepherds probably the least likely people to be included in this story, tending sheep in a field outside Bethlehem but instructed by angels they travel into town to search for the manger; and the magi, royalty from an eastern land who studied the stars and seeing one they had never seen before, travel westward to find what they believe signaled the birth of a new king. They were all on a journey, not entirely sure what they would find when they reached their destination, but hopeful that somehow, someday they would find what they were searching for.

All of us are on a journey. We are seeking health and financial security, personal safety, happiness, some of us are seeking employment or relationships, a sense of purpose, some reason, some purpose to keep moving, or maybe in the words of Bono: *I have climbed the highest mountains; I have run through the fields... I have run I have crawled I have scaled these city walls... but I still haven't found what I'm looking for.* From the moment we take our first breath until the moment we release our final breath, we are on a journey. And at some point, we all lose our way or at the very least we end up in the wilderness.

For the past four weeks, we have been using Brene Brown's description of the wilderness that she describes in her book, *Braving the Wilderness*. Wilderness, she says, is a metaphor for those places of vulnerability that we cannot control. We all will find ourselves in the wilderness – a place you did not expect and did not want and could not control – have you ever felt that – not in control and feeling lost. Maybe you did something or failed to do something; or it's the unexpected circumstances of life, and you don't know how you will get through this. Will you get through this? And maybe that's where you are tonight, hoping to find some way to Brave the Wilderness and come out on the other side.

Mary and Joseph were on their own wilderness journey, two teenagers – Mary, 12 or 13 years old, 9 months pregnant; Joseph not much older than that; forced to walk 90 miles through the hill country of Judea to obey Caesar's decree. This was not a journey that had anticipated or ever wanted. Shepherds – you didn't grow wanting to be a shepherd, you were a shepherd because there was nothing else – and everyone knew you were the lowest of the low. They were stuck in a wilderness that they could not control. And even the Magi, though they chose to make the journey across the desert in search of a newborn king. Their journey took them to Jerusalem where they met Herod and later realized they were putting their own lives and the life of this baby at risk by informing Herod that a new king had entered the world. But that night 2000 years ago, God did something that would make it possible for every one of us to brave the wilderness. There in a Bethlehem manger they discovered something more than a baby.

Mathew tells us this is Emmanuel – a Hebrew word that means “God with us;” Luke tells us this is Christ the Lord. John tells us “the true light that shine on all people was coming into the world.”

The whole idea of Christmas is that we were in the wilderness. Is there any parent who wouldn't do whatever was possible to find a child who was lost? Whenever an AMBER alert sends a notification to my phone – it doesn't matter whether I know the child, I pay attention and start looking around. If it was my child, that's what I would want.

The message of Scripture is the story of a God who refuses to give up on people. From the opening chapters of the book of Genesis, we read how God brought forth everything that is and God called it good. That includes human life – you and me, created in the image of God. Of all that God made, humans are the only ones to know there is a God and to be able to connect with that God. God longs for a relationship with each one of us. But by the third chapter of Genesis, we read story after story of people who choose their own way and end up hurting themselves and others. They lose their way. And there comes a point when they cry out for God's help. Deliver us or save us or help us. And God who has never left them makes himself known, and they are able to get through the wilderness. And for a time, the people live in relationship with God, eager to please God and to seek his purposes. But it is not long until the cycle repeats itself. People declaring their freedom, pursuing their own purposes, and moving in their own direction until they once again end up in a place of vulnerability that they cannot control, and so they call out to God and God who has never wandered steps in to love. All God wants is to love and to be loved. Finally, 2000 years ago, God decided to enter the world. John tells us: **The Word became flesh and made his home among us. God moved into the neighborhood** to show us the depth of God's love and how to brave the wilderness.

Willa Cather was an American author of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century who wrote a short story titled *Burglar's Christmas*. It is the story of a young man named William who has failed at everything. Alone and desperately hungry, he wanders the streets of Chicago, out of contact with his parents for years. One Christmas night, he comes to the realization that he is lost in a wilderness of his own making. He is a survivor, but just barely. And on this Christmas night, the only option left to him, he concludes, is stealing.

Breaking into a house that night, he discovers that he has burglarized the house of his own parents – who, unbeknownst to him, had moved to Chicago. His mother recognizes him rummaging through her jewelry drawer in the dark. She moves in to kiss her wayward son. “Oh my boy, we have waited so long for this!” Frightened and shaken, he resists her embrace. He asks: “I wonder if you know how much you pardon?” She replies: “Much or little, what does it matter? Have you wandered so far and paid such a bitter price for knowledge and not yet learned that love has nothing to do with pardon and forgiveness, that it only loves and loves and loves?” That's when she leans in to kiss him, and it is also when that love takes hold in his life.

When our daughters were little, one of my favorite stories to read was *The Runaway Bunny*. It is the story of a little bunny who wants to run away from his mother. So he says, “I will become a fish in a stream and swim away from you.” Or “I will become a rock on a mountain high above you.” Or “I will become a sailboat and sail away from you.” And each time the little bunny says how he will run away. He wants to live on his own. No rules, no restrictions, no expectations. It seems life would be so much easier that way – just live life my way. But each time, the mother bunny finds a way to be with him anyway. She says, “If you become a fish, I will become a fisherman and fish for you.” “If you become a rock, I will become a rock climber and climb to

where you are.” “If you become a sailboat, I will become the wind that blows you to where I am.” There is no escaping that kind of love.

God says, “I will even become flesh and move into your neighborhood.” There is nothing you can do and no place you can go where God cannot find you. The question is will you trust that? To know in your heart that God is not going to mess up your life. God had a hand in creating you, and God is on your side, wanting the very best for you. God will never give up on you. At the end of the story, the little bunny says, “aw shucks, I might just as well stay where I am and be your little bunny.”

There at the manger that Christmas night – and now this Christmas night – we remember and receive the greatest love story of all time, and it is for you. When no one was watching, in the middle of the night, a life came into the world that would be the light for all people. **This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him.** And tonight you may be in the middle of your own wilderness and you just need to know that there is a God who says no matter how hard it gets I will not leave you alone. God will never give up on you.