

**Sermon for Zion, December 24, 2017 - 10:30 am – Advent 4**

**Hymns:** A Candle Is Burning; 139 – Hark, the Herald Angels;

145 – In the Bleak Mid-Winter; 163 - Of the Father's Love Begotten

**Scriptures:** 1 John 4:7-19 selected verses (NLT)

**Sermon Title:** Of The Father's Love Begotten – Rev. Douglas Rollwage

*1 John 4:7-19 selected verses (NLT)*

*Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.*

*God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.*

*Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us.*

*God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect...*

*We love each other because he loved us first.*

There are Christmas hymns we don't sing at Christmas. There are plenty we do sing, of course, some over and over, but plenty more we don't. Our hymnbook has 36 hymns in the Christmas section; that's not counting Epiphany hymns like, "We Three Kings," or Advent hymns such as, "Come thou long expected Jesus," or my favourite Advent hymn, "On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry." Few things cheer me up at Christmas like the thought of Baptists crying (those of you attending the Prince Street Advent Series already heard that joke. The other Prince Street Clergy are still getting me back).

Some Christmas hymns we don't sing because we don't know them, like "Lord, you were rich." Anyone ever sing that? Some we don't sing because they're a bit depressing, such as "In Bethlehem A Newborn Boy," which has the courage to sing about the least happy part of the Christmas story – the homicidal King Herod ordering the death of the Bethlehem babies. "*The soldiers sought the Christ in vain,*" it goes, "*not yet was he to share our pain; but down the ages rings the cry of those who saw their children die.*" No, we don't sing that one.

Some, like "That boy-child of Mary" have great words – I particularly like Verse 4, "*Gift of the Father, to human mother, makes him our brother, of*

*Bethlehem.*” But the tune, from Malawi, is difficult for us largely rhythmless Islanders to sing. So we don’t.

But of all the Christmas hymns we don’t sing, I most regret us missing out on, “Of eternal love begotten,” number 163 in our books. One of the reasons I regret not singing it, is that it is among the oldest Christian hymns we have in our book – there are Hebrew Psalms 1000 years older, but in terms of purpose-written Christian hymns, it is right up there with the very oldest of all. Written more than 1600 years ago, and still sung around the world today, I think it is worthy of some respect.

As is the author of the hymn, Aurelius Clemens Prudentius, who lived between 348 and 413 AD. A prominent Roman lawyer and judge, it wasn’t until he was by Roman standards an old man – exactly my age, it turns out – that his Christian faith came to life within him. As he wrote:

*Now, then, at last, close on the very end of life (my age!),  
May yet my sinful soul put off her foolishness;  
And if by deeds it cannot, yet, at least, by words give praise to God,  
Join day to day by constant hymns,  
Fail not each night in songs to celebrate the Lord,  
Fight against heresies, maintain the Christian faith.*

He made good on this vow, writing many poems and hymns, many of which come down to us today, but only one of which can be found in our hymnbooks – the one we don’t sing. He called it, “*Corde natus ex parentis ante mundi exordium*” – literally, “*Born from the Father’s heart before the beginning of worlds.*” Our hymnbook meddled with the words a bit, but it goes like this:

**Of the Father’s love begotten,  
Ere the worlds began to be,  
He is Alpha and Omega,  
He the source, the ending He,  
Of the things that are, that have been,  
And that future years shall see,  
evermore and evermore!**

Born from the heart of the father. Born from the Father’s love. Today, as we light the Candle of Love, as we stand on the very Eve of Christmas, I want us for a moment to consider, in amazement and awestruck wonder, the Father’s love. We

think about the love of Mary for her newborn, as well we should; about the love and care of Joseph for his new family, as is right. But old Aurelius Clemens Prudentius can't get away from Christmas being all about the unfathomable love of the Father; the indescribable love of God.

John, in his letter, is reaching for the same high goal – trying to capture, in words, this incredible gift of love. We read his words earlier:

*God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.*

The gift of Jesus – the one true and great gift of Christmas – is nothing less than the full expression of the love of God – of God's love for you, for me, for all our hurting world.

God sends us Jesus – God sends us himself, his love, his heart – to show us how much he loves us; to show us what real love is. It is giving the best of yourself – the heart of yourself – to another, even while knowing that gift will cost all you have, all you are – even while knowing that it will not be reciprocated; it will not be returned. And that love – greater in power than all the stars of the universe – the creative power, in fact, which gave birth to all the stars of the universe – is born to us of a virgin.

**O that birth forever blessèd,  
When the virgin, full of grace,  
By the Holy Ghost conceiving,  
Bore the Saviour of our race;  
And the Babe, the world's Redeemer,  
First revealed His sacred face,  
Evermore and evermore!**

That sacred face, first gazed upon in wondering adoration by Mary and Joseph, would grow into a face which would look upon the world with unfathomable eyes of love. Eyes which would look upon the sick, and bring healing; which would look upon the hungry, and bring food; which would look upon the tormented, and bring deliverance. Those eyes would look upon the poor, and bring dignity; upon the rejected, and bring acceptance; upon the sinner, and bring forgiveness; upon the lost, and bring light.

Those eyes would look beyond his own people, beyond his own land, his own time, and would look to us, to our brokenness, to our need, to our petty grudges and resentments and desires and need, and in those eyes, in that life, through God's love, we too would find hope, and healing, and light, and life. Through the unfathomable gift of God's love made real in Jesus Christ, you and I would come to know the Father's love. Would receive the gift of the Father's love.

How to respond to such a gift? How can we reciprocate, how can we give back to God a gift of such incalculable cost, a gift which endured even the cross? Again, at a loss, we turn to the letter of John:

*Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us... And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect... We love each other because he loved us first.*

When we look upon the sick, and bring prayer; when we look upon the hungry, and bring food; upon the tormented, and bring understanding; upon the poor, and bring help; when we look upon the rejected, and bring acceptance; upon the one who has wronged us, and bring forgiveness; upon the lonely, and bring friendship; when we look upon the grieving, and bring comfort; upon the lost, and bring welcome: when we love each other, we look upon one another, with the eyes, with the love, of Christ. *"And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect... We love each other because he loved us first."*

What gift should we give at Christmas? Really, only one gift will do – the gift that was given to us. The gift we most needed, and ever shall. The gift born of the Father's heart. The gift of love.

***O ye heights of heaven adore Him;  
Angel hosts, His praises sing;  
Powers, dominions, bow before Him,  
And extol our God and king!  
Let no tongue on earth be silent,  
Every voice in concert sing,  
Evermore and evermore!***

Amen.