

FIRST LESSON: Micah 5:2-5a
SECOND LESSON: Hebrews 10:5-10
THE GOSPEL: Luke 1:39-45

Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 23, 2018

“LOVE A Tale of Two Angels”
Sermon Preached by Pastor Charles T. Paulson
American Lutheran Church of Sun City

Let the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight Oh Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen

Welcome to the end of Advent. It's about time. Today is the fourth Sunday in Advent, and there are never more than four Sundays in Advent because Advent always ends right when Christmas comes. We are about as close to the end of Advent we could ever be. It could be one more day later, it could be the 24th, that's tomorrow. Last year, the last Sunday in Advent was the 24th of December. What else happens on the 24th of December? Well, come on.... That's tomorrow, Christmas Eve. So we had to decide, Sunday the fourth Sunday in Advent, Sunday afternoon our 3:00 and 5:00 Christmas Eve services, are we going to have four services on that Sunday? Are people going to come out twice in the morning and in the evening? So we determined we better cancel one of those services. We weren't going to cancel 3:00 or 5:00, so we cancelled one in the morning. So we went from 8:30 and 10:30, but we just went to one 9:30 worship service. This weekend we have kept our usual schedule. We have four days in a row of worship at American Lutheran Church. We had worship last evening at 4:00, we have worship this morning, we have worship tomorrow afternoon and we have worship Tuesday morning. All of those will have a Christmas message.

Christmas, I think you probably will agree is more significant than the fourth Sunday of Advent. But I want to have a little part of Christmas too, even though today is not Christmas. So I am going to end my message today with a Christmas message. The first part will be Advent and for Ken it will be a little longer sermon that you have to listen to because I got my shot.

Pastor Lowell focuses on themes, and of course during the Advent season, we have had the themes that he has picked – Hope, Peace, Joy, and now Love. You have heard Hope, Peace and Joy. Today the Advent message is Love. Love is a very complex word. It's used in so many ways, some good, some not so good. Love is a word of action, but it is also a noun. It has a condition and an attitude and in Greek there are several words that we translated in our Bible as the word love, even though there are different words in Greek.

I want to give you an example of the use of the word love. Maybe a little facetious example, but a couple was going to have an exchange student in their home. An exchange student who knew some English, but didn't really know much about the United States. So the husband of this couple went to the airport to pick him up and bring him to their home. As they are going through the terminal, they went past an ice cream stand. So the man decided to buy a couple of ice cream cones, he bought two cones and he took one and gave one to the new student. The man then licked the ice cream cone that he had, and he said “This is ice cream, we love ice cream here in the United States.” Then he drove him home. As they drove into the driveway of their home and got out of the car, there was a football laying alongside the driveway. The man picked up the football, he said, “This is a football, we love football in the United States.” Then he kicked the football. He walked into the house and his wife was there. He said “This is my wife, I love my wife. I hope you will love her too.” And the poor student didn't know if he was supposed to lick her or kick her. (laughter) It's kind of an extreme example, but I got your attention.

When I grew up I had a great definition of love. It was this. I thought it was a really clever definition, really cute little jingle. *Love is that feeling that you feel when you feel that certain feeling that you never felt before.* What

a terribly bad definition that is. Love can be a feeling, but it is much more than a feeling because feelings change so rapidly and so often. In relationships we often need to make a decision to love somebody when they are not very lovable. That's what the whole connotation of grace is all about. Undeserved love. A few weeks ago the word love got a lot of print after President Bush died. It was written in big letters in newspapers many times because his last words were "I love you." They are powerful.

The Gospel and Lessons today don't really focus on love. I probably should have changed the text that we had read today but I didn't. I want us to look at something else as far as scripture is concerned. It gives us a definition of love. So we are going to look at the most powerful love chapter of all scripture, and many of you know exactly what that is. It is 1 Corinthians, chapter 13. A great definition of love. First Corinthians 13 starts out – *If I speak in the tongues of men and angels but have not loved, I am a noisy gong and a clanging symbol.* That's no reference to our bell choir. Chapter 13 ends *So faith, hope and love abound, these three, but the greatest of these is love.* Maybe that's why Pastor Lowell made love the last in the Advent series that we are dealing with. It could read *hope, peace, joy and love, but the greatest of these is love.*

In weddings that I have done over the years and I have done hundreds of them, I have often used 1 Corinthians 13. Many times when I did weddings, I would give guarantees with my weddings. Not one year, two years, five years, I would give life time guarantees with my weddings. But with any kind of guarantee, you probably know that there are some stipulations to go along with that. You need to follow through with certain things. If you have a guarantee on your car, you need to do maintenance. So I say to couples when I used 1 Corinthians 13, "For this guarantee to be lasting, you need to have love and you need to do love." Then I give the words of 1 Corinthians 13. "The love of which I speak is slow to lose patience, it looks for a way of being constructive, it is not possessive. It is neither anxious to impress nor does it cherish inflated ideas of its own importance. Love has good manners and does not pursue selfish advantage. It is not touchy. Love does not compile statistics of evil. Love knows no end to its endurance, no fading of its hope, it can outlast anything. It is in fact, the one thing that still stands when all else is fallen." Then I would say to the couple, "If you have this kind of love, your marriage will be what you want it to be, lasting. That kind of love is not just important for marriage, but it is important in our relations." Love, love, love.

We are getting ready to celebrate the greatest act of God's love. Christmas, Monday, tomorrow, and Tuesday you are going to hear a lot of words from Chapter 2 of Luke. You could also hear Chapter 1 and 2 of Matthew. Have you ever heard the Christmas story in John? How many of you know the Christmas story in John? Probably have heard it, but you didn't know it. It's not a chapter, it's just one verse. It is verse 16 of Chapter 3. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only son.* Isn't that what Christmas is all about? Christmas is God's love, Christmas isn't just families getting together for Christmas dinner, as many do. It's not Santa Claus or Rudolph or Frosty the Snowman or Jingle Bells or Christmas cards, or even Christmas trees and presents – they can be there, but that's not what Christmas really is all about. Christmas is remembering and celebrating the love of God that comes to us in the birth of Jesus. God's love for the world and God's love for us. *For God so loved the world that he gave us Jesus.* We celebrate that at this time of the year.

I want to tell you about a Christmas that I experienced almost 60 years ago, more than 59. A Christmas that I have never been able to forget. I was a seminary student at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. At Christmas my wife and I went to my home in Southeastern Wisconsin to celebrate Christmas with my parents. Her parents lived in Scottsdale, Arizona, that was too far for my '49 Pontiac to go. My dad was a pastor at Norway Lutheran Church in southeastern Wisconsin. The oldest Norwegian Lutheran Church in the United States. They just celebrated their 175th anniversary. We are looking forward to in a few years just 50 for American Lutheran Church and I have a lot of nostalgia back in Wisconsin. The first church there was on a hill, it was called Norway hill. It was made out of logs and it was the highest hill in Racine County. When that little log church got too small, they decided to build another church there. So they tore that log church down, and they made a new church. Those logs were taken to Luther Seminary in St. Paul and reconstructed. That church that was built back in

Wisconsin in 1843 still stands on the seminary grounds there. The next church that was built there was built of brick, stained glass windows, and a high steeple with a cross at the top of the steeple. That cross had a neon light around it that went on every night. It was on a timer. My father, the pastor of the church, set the timer. I was told that if that light was out when I got home from a date, I was late. As I got a little older the lights stayed on longer and longer. That church too became too small, and they decided that they needed a larger one. So they had an architect draw a new church. As they looked at it, they realized they couldn't build the entire thing together. So the determination was that they would build what they call the parish unit, which was three stories tall. It had a large fellowship hall with a stage and a kitchen. They had regular worship there when that was finished. As I graduated from high school, I carried just about every stone and every block that was in that new building. But they waited to build the sanctuary until they were more financially able to do that. American Lutheran Church could have learned from that.

On special occasions there were worship in that old church on the hill. So when there were special occasions, all the paraments that were used in the parish unit had to be taken up the hill to be used there. Then brought back the next day, like for Christmas day which was bigger. My wife and I had our wedding in that little old church just a few months before this Christmas Eve happened. But that night in southeast Wisconsin we had a beautiful candlelight worship. The worship ended, my dad greeted people as they left the church, my wife, my mom and my little brother walked down the hill because the parsonage was right across the street from there. We always had our Christmas tradition on Christmas Eve, not Christmas morning. So as everybody left, my dad and I started packing up the paraments, the candles, and such to take down the hill to use for Christmas Day which had a much bigger service. So we packed them up, put them in some boxes, turned off the heat, we started to carry some of the boxes out to the trunk of dad's car which was just outside the church.

As we walked out the front doors onto the steps, there were two girls standing there by themselves. Everyone else was gone. We asked them why they were still there. They said they were waiting for their brother to come and pick them up and take them home. He had taken them to church but they were having problems with the car. So dad and I loaded the paraments in the trunk of his car, and we were ready to go down to celebrate our Christmas at home. But we couldn't leave the girls, and we couldn't ask them to come to our house because their brother wouldn't know where they were. We invited them back into the edge of the narthex where it was still warm there. So they waited, and we waited for their brother to show up. We talked to them, can't remember their names, but I know that one was about 12 and one was about 9 years old. We asked them where they lived and they said they lived way back by Lake Tichigan and somebody here last night knows exactly where that is, and how remote it is back in southeastern Wisconsin. We waited and their brother didn't come. We tried to be hospitable. It was hard to do when you want to get home to do Christmas. I thought "why did these two girls have to come to church on Christmas Eve?" If they hadn't come, we could have been down the hill, having some goodies, opening some presents. But they disrupted our Christmas Eve. Finally lights of a car appeared, they came up through the gates, but there was only room for a couple cars right up around the church, and dad's was one of them. But the car drove up through the cemetery, right by the church. Their brother had arrived, thank God. The girls got into the car, and we said goodbye and Merry Christmas. The car wouldn't start. But we were on a hill, so he had turned around so they could coast down the hill and maybe the car would start on the way down. So we watched them go down the hill and disappear. They were gone. After all that waiting, we could be on our way home to celebrate Christmas Eve.

So dad and I drove down the hill and across the road that separates the church from our house, and as we were turning into our driveway, I looked down the road. It was a beautiful moonlit night. Did you see the moon this morning on the way to church? What a beautiful full moon it was. It was a full moon that night so with the freshly fallen snow, that was really beautiful. Dreaming of a white Christmas, that's the kind of vision you might have in your mind. Like I said, it looked like there was a car stopped on the road. So dad turned around and we drove down the road, and there were the two girls and the brother trying to push the car up onto the highway. I wish I hadn't noticed, we could have just stayed in our driveway.

So we offered to push the car with ours. Those were the days when they had real bumpers. So we lined up our bumper with their bumper, they got in the car, and we pushed them up onto the highway. There was an auto place just down the road a little ways. I didn't figure it would be open because sometimes the guy wasn't even open regular hours. So we had to go past that and slowly up the road pushing, you know how slow you have to go if you are pushing somebody with a car. Of course many of you haven't even done that. We pushed them and there was another auto place up the road at the north end of Wind Lake, Wisconsin. I doubted that would be open either, and it wasn't. But we weren't going to push them any further. We pushed them into a parking lot by a grocery store. There was a bigger auto place down at the far end of the lake, in the opposite direction of where these people lived. We knew the owners and they lived right next to the shop. So we had the brother and the two girls get into the back seat of our car, and we drove them down to the repair shop there. We talked to the people who owned it, gave them the keys to the car and told them where it was and asked them if they could get that taken care of as soon after Christmas as possible.

Of course we knew then we had to take these three back to their home. It was getting later, and later. Like I said, they lived near a small lake and it was remote. There was only one road into this area and you had to go out the same way you came. The main highways were clear, but the back roads and the side roads were covered with packed snow. This was long before cell phones, we couldn't call home and say, "Hay, this is why we aren't home." So my mom, my wife, and my brother had no idea where in the world we were. We were sure they were concerned because worship had been over for some time. We wanted to be there with them. As we traveled slowly on packed snow, we tried to be civil, or at least I tried to be civil in spite of the irritation that I had. There was lots of silence in the car. Then they said we were almost at their home, thank God.

Then my dad said, as we were pulling up to where they said they lived. "I suppose you are going home to celebrate Christmas." The older girl said, "No." We asked why not. And she said their dad didn't believe in Christmas. So we asked "Do you have a Christmas tree and presents?" And she said again, "no." Then we asked that question, and still after 60 years, I get choked up about that question, and answer. The question was "Then what do you do for Christmas?" And the girl said, "we had our Christmas at church." What they had gone through to be able to be there on Christmas Eve. It really hit when she said that. Maybe we hadn't had our Christmas in church, maybe we still an idea of Christmas was around the tree and presents and goodies and such. A pastor, my dad, and pastor-to-be, me, had to be reminded of what Christmas was all about. Dad and I were pretty silent on our way home. We arrived well over 2 hours after worship had ended. Our family was furious, they chewed us out the moment we walked into the house. They were angry until we told them this story that I just told you – about the real meaning of Christmas. They were sorry that they had been so angry.

That Christmas Eve turned out to be the most memorable Christmas Eve I have spent in my entire life. I wasn't on the hillside outside of Bethlehem when the angels announced "Unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord." Meaning of Christmas, but I won't forget – I won't forget, the message I received nearly 60 years ago, the message of the real meaning of Christmas brought to me by two angels, one aged 12 and one aged 9. Amen