



# First United Church of Oak Park

## **It's a Love Story**

John 3: 16

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Here we are on the fourth Sunday of Advent and we have lit the candle of love. I do promise to give you a message of love, but I ask that you bear with me. Join me on a meandering journey, trusting that we will arrive where we are meant to. I have faith the Spirit will be at work, because the Spirit has been at work helping me see and hear things from others that have brought me to this moment and made me want to bring these things together and share them with you. I will be drawing inspiration from scripture, from Quinn Caldwell's book *All I Really Want* and from our own member, Tara Dull's, Advent devotional.

For Quinn Caldwell's December 12 morning devotion, he starts by talking about Adam & Eve in the garden. He writes,

*"Here's how some people tell the story: Adam and Eve broke the rules way back in the Garden of Eden. God punished them in all sorts of ways — mostly by allowing death to enter the world. The stain of this original sin passed to each new generation through the sexual union of the parents, and each new baby is born deserving to die. God eventually felt bad about this or something and 'graciously' decided to offer a way out. So God came to us in Jesus Christ and made of Godself a sacrifice on the cross. This was because only the spilling of God's blood was powerful enough to wash that original sin away. So now, everybody's still born deserving to die. ... I dare you to try and tell this story while holding a newborn baby. ... If you can't bring yourself to do that, then I for one think you ought to find a different way to tell the story of Jesus.*

*If we don't tell the story this way, though, then what way should we tell the story? Why did Jesus need to come? Did he need to come? What was the point? What difference did it make?"*

These are all valid questions.

His evening devotion for the 12<sup>th</sup> is inspired by our scripture, John 3:16, "God so loved the world that [God] gave [God's] only son, that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life."

*"How about this instead? We're not totally depraved; we're just idiots, and we're way more helpless than any of us wants to admit.*

*How about this? We're capable of great things, but we're all screw-ups too ... just huge dorks ... making messes while trying to do our best.*

*How about this? We almost never have all the information, so lots of our decisions suck.*

*How about this? We are to God as a 2-year-old is to a well-adjusted parent.*

*How about this? We're easily distracted by shiny things and tend to wander off if you don't keep an eye on us.*

*How about this? God loves us not in spite of all this but because of it, because of the sheer depth of our goofiness and ultimate helplessness. Sometimes, all this really makes God mad; sometimes, it cracks God up. Eventually, God got tired of hollering down to us from upstairs to tell us to please stop fighting and just keep it to a dull roar. So Godself finally came down to break it up, to play with us a little, to give us some attention, to have some skin-contact time, and to see if he couldn't find something constructive for us to do.*

*How about this? God so loved the world that God wasn't about to let anything ... keep God away from us.*

*How about this? It's not about how good or bad we are. It's about how good God is."*

We tend to make things about us, but what if the answers to such questions, like why did Jesus come, and did he need to, have nothing to do with us? It's not about our nature, our origins, or how good or bad we are. It's about the nature of God, the goodness of God and how loving God is.

What if the answer to all those posed, tough questions is love?

How should we tell the story of Jesus? Tell it as a love story.

Why did Jesus need to come? To show the love of God to all people.

Did he need to come? That depends. Do you think it's necessary to show and experience love? I would argue yes.

What difference did it make? Love makes all the difference. It is a power that shouldn't be underestimated

This week, I read Tara Dull's devotional and it resonated with me. I really appreciate when someone shares their perspective in the pursuit of a deeper understanding of Mary. She says at one point, "Yes, it is easy to imagine Mary's tears, loneliness, despair, and fear." Although not all of us are able to identify with Mary's situation, given our current context, I wonder if there is anyone among us who hasn't cried, or felt lonely, despair, or afraid in the last nine months. I hope and pray that if you have experienced any of these things, you know that you are not alone.

For the last several weeks we have been singing, "Don't Be Afraid" by John Bell as our musical response. We sing:

*"Don't be afraid, my love is stronger. My love is stronger than your fear.  
Don't be afraid, my love is stronger, and I have promised to be always near."*

Gabriel tells Mary, Be not afraid — that doesn't mean that fear equates to a lack of faith. Maybe it's not so much a command or instruction to not feel fear, but rather assurance that fear is normal, but it needn't be greater than your faith, because it really isn't about us. It's about God, the work God is doing, and how good and loving God is.

Hear the difference in these words:

*"You don't need to be afraid, my love is stronger. My love is stronger than your fear.  
You don't need to be afraid, my love is stronger, and I have promised to be always near."*

"Feeling fear doesn't mean we're not trusting God. Fear and trust often hold hands." Tara's devotion shed light on and reminded us of the real fear Mary must have experienced, but her faith and trust in the love of God strengthened her. Quinn's devotion reminded us that there is more than one way to hear a story, and it's not always about us. It's about the nature of God, which is love. It's a love story.

“God cradles us in love. God also cradles our fear. God love us and holds our fear with us.”

I pray that in your times of loneliness, despair, and fear, your faith is greater, and that you may always know this love story. “God so loved the world that Godself was born into it as an infant, to an unwed teenage mother of great faith so that we might know God’s abundant love, and be witness to the hope, peace, and joy of such a gift.” Amen.