# SERMON NOTES FOR ADVENT WEEK 4:
# INVITATION TO LOVE

24 December 2024

## INTRODUCTION

It's Christmas tomorrow! The first invitation went out 3 weeks ago and it seems to have been a long wait for tomorrow, waiting for the excitement of singing Christmas carols; Christmas food, Christmas trees, mince pies and presents. We also remember that it's the celebration of the reality of Christ amongst us, '*Immanuel*'. During these last 3 weeks, each Sunday we have been invited to Hope, Peace and Joy; and did you notice that they are all characteristics of our God. Today, He invites us to discover love in INVITATION TO LOVE.

## SCRIPTURE:

This invitation is found in Luke 1, in verses 26-38.

***Luke 1:26-38 (NIV)***

*26 In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee,*
*27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.*

*28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you." 29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. 31 You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."*

*34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"*

*35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. 37 For nothing is impossible with God."*

*38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.*

The town of Nazareth was looking forward to celebrating the wedding feast of Joseph and Mary. They knew Joseph to be righteous, and that Mary was a virgin, so this was going to be a glorious celebration. Then Gabriel visits and Mary is left pregnant! Something happened during that visit, something wonderful that led to God becoming human and demonstrating the full extent of His love.

These verses from Luke 1 are an invitation from God to experience His love by enjoying His favour, trusting His Holy Spirit in us, and finally accepting His invitation to be loved and to love.

## 1.INVITED TO ENJOY GOD'S FAVOUR

*28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are **highly favoured**! The Lord is with you." 29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, **you have found favour with God**.*

The first time I read these Scriptures, I misread "favoured" as '*Mary was flavoured*'. Wonderfully, it has a ring of truth by reading it as 'flavour!' We are God's recipe, created by Him, flavoured by Him to become more like Him through the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

Gabriel talking to Mary caused her some consternation – she was "greatly troubled…" at what he said. The NLT says she was '*confused and disturbed'*. I am not surprised, because I think that if an angel appeared and spoke to me, I wouldn't remember anything else…*it's an ANGEL!* I would be off, running away as fast as I could get away. Despite her dismay, she listened to what was said.

The angel calls Mary '***highly favoured'*** – or we could say it this way: "of all the people on earth at that time, God chooses you, Mary; not because of what you've done, but just because **He loves you**, accepts you and trusts you." That's favour. This is not a call to worship Mary, because we're also loved and favoured by God, we've also been chosen and accepted by God. (Read this verse by inserting your name after "you.") ***That's highly favoured!***

***1 Peter 2:9-10 (NLT2)***
*9 But you are not like that, for **you are** a chosen people. **You are** royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, **you** can show others the goodness of God, for **He called you** out of the darkness into His wonderful light.*
*10 "Once you had no identity as a people; now **you are** God's people. Once you received no mercy; now **you have** received God's mercy."*

Mary was chosen by God to bring Jesus into the world. That's favour!

And God has chosen us, and He accepts us right now as we are to show Jesus to the world, speaking of and demonstrating His love and power as we personally experience God in our life. **That's also favour!**

Mary experienced the very presence of Holy Spirit in her and only by the presence of Holy Spirit in us is it possible to demonstrate God's power and love to others today.

## 2.INVITATION TO TRUST HOLY SPIRIT POWER

*The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.*

God's power, working through Holy Spirit, enabled Mary to fall pregnant without any help from Joseph, or any other man. Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit, was able to choose His mother, the time of His birth and the place of His birth. No one else has ever had the same opportunity. What seems to be physically impossible to us, God does, because *nothing is impossible for God!*

Mary did not understand how God would make her pregnant, but she trusted Him enough to say – in my paraphrase: "*work in me and through me, Lord, however You will!" (see vs 38)* We are invited to experience what to us is physically impossible, **being made possible**, by surrendering to God as Mary did, by being ready to say – "*I don't understand how, but with You God all things are possible and here I am to do as You want*!"

Years later, at Pentecost (see Acts 2) we read about how Holy Spirit came and took up and continues to take up residence in all who accepted Jesus as Saviour.

***1 Corinthians 6:19-20a (NLT2)***
*19 Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, 20 for God bought you with a high price.*

Isn't this is our clearest indication of God's acceptance, of His grace to us, that He chooses **our bodies as His residence whilst we're on earth**. And to make sure that we understand how serious He is about this, He adds this:

***2 Corinthians 1:21-22 (NIV)***
*21 Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, 22* ***set his seal of ownership on us****, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit,* ***guaranteeing what is to come****.*

God loves us enough that He has guaranteed that we are His, full of His presence and He wants to demonstrate His love and power through us. When we allow His love power to work through us, then God is present and we are invited to love and be loved by Him.

## 3.INVITATION TO LOVE

> *One time a schoolteacher was registering two new students who were sisters. She asked their ages and requested their birth dates. One of the sisters said, "We're both seven. My birthday April 8th and my sister's is April 20th." The teacher replied, "That's impossible." "****No, it's true," said the other sister. One of us is adapted****." "Oh," the teacher said, "Which one?" The two sisters looked at each other and then the first one said, "We asked our parents that same question a long time ago. And they said,* ***they loved us both equally*** *and couldn't remember which one of us was adopted."*

This is how God's love is, there are no strings attached when it comes to Him loving us. He loves each of us the same.

Christmas is an invitation to fully experience the absolutely sacrificial, unconditional, completely giving love of God. John describes it like this:

***1 John 4:16 (NLT2)***
*We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in His love.* ***God is love****, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.*

On Christmas morning, God's love for all of us was made real. His only Son, Jesus, sent to live amongst us, until He became the perfect sinless sacrifice that paid the full cost of the sin of the whole world, demonstrated God's unconditional love for all mankind. God's very nature is love, unconditional love:

***Titus 3:4-7 (NLT2)***
*4 …When God our Savior* ***revealed His kindness and love****, 5 He saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit. 6 He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Saviour. 7 Because of His grace He declared us righteous and gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life."*

We are loved without any strings attached, no t's & c's; there is no small print to the invitation. **It's a simple invitation: come and be loved**.

- No conditions about how you must feel about yourself or how you need to behave. **Just come and be loved.**

- Has it been a long, long year? **Come and be loved.**
- Has it been filled with heartache, hurt and hideous times? **Come and be loved.**
- So just **come and be loved** by God who knew you in the womb, and who has never rejected you and says: "*I love you with an everlasting love!"*

***Jeremiah 31:3b (NIV)***
*The LORD …says: "I have loved you with an everlasting love ….*

Here's the thing about 'everlasting' – it can never end. And never ending also means that it never stops. Think about this – no matter what we do, or do not do, or think about, God never stops loving you. Read this with me:

***Romans 8:38-39 (TLB)***
*38 For I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from His love. Death can't, and life can't. The angels won't, and all the powers of hell itself cannot keep God's love away. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, 39 or where we are—high above the sky, or in the deepest ocean—nothing will ever be able to separate us from the love of God demonstrated by our Lord Jesus Christ when He died for us.*

The very essence of unconditional love is that **it is not self-focused** and desires to share this amazing truth so that everyone experiences this love. Every time we accept God's invitation to be loved, our own desire to love others increases so they can also experience God's love, because love is giving by nature, God gave His Son; God gave us His Holy Spirit…Jesus knew that being loved results in loving others in the same way and so showing everyone that we are His followers:

***John 13:34-35 (NIV)***
*34 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."*

It's easy to be like everyone else, only interested in what is good for me, always searching out the biggest and the best. But being like everyone else does not put God on display in love and power. (*to quote Brian Blount*) But loving others encourages us to see their needs, their reality and to share God's gift of life, healing, and restoration with them.

But John also reminds us that we can choose to remain self-centred, and refuse to love others, rather remaining as 'secret service' Christians. But then we will not 'know' God, (meaning we will not be aware of or 'feel' His presence, nor have any knowledge of Him).

***1 John 4:8 (NLT2)***
*But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.*

There is a song that reminds us that love is '*a many splendored thing!*' and God invites us to love as we are loved so others may experience the many splendours of God's love.

## Concluding thoughts

Christmas in our world today is about giving gifts that show our love for that person; but it is really ALL about God's gift of His ultimate love to you and me. We are invited to accept His gift, His Son Jesus, given to us to be our Saviour, and the gift of His Holy Spirit, who powerfully helps us to live like Jesus did. When we do…

***Ephesians 3:17-19 (NLT2)***

*17 Then Christ will make His home in your hearts as you trust in Him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. 18 And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep His love is. 19 May you* ***experience the love of Christ****, though it is too great to understand fully. Then* ***you will be made complete*** *with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.*

Here is an invitation to experience God's love in every area of our life. When we've allowed the circumstances of our life this past year to take our focus away from God and all we can see are the problems and issues. When life is overwhelmed by work, and we're exhausted by the continuous grind to produce; know this – we will only be made complete when we experience the love of God.

And we are invited to accept this gift of His love, given that we may always know that we are supremely loved, unceasingly loved; and extravagantly loved. This is **the overwhelming truth of Christmas – God loves you!** And He wants you to accept His invitation to love, to joy, to peace and to hope this Christmas.

Amen.